

# There's a Dinosaur in My Armoire:

## A Creative Exploration of Women's Dress Choice

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## Table of Contents

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Table of Figures.....	4
Abstract .....	6
Keywords .....	6
Acknowledgements.....	7
Signed Statement of Originality.....	8
Definitions .....	9
Preface.....	12
How the maker became the meaning maker .....	12
Introduction.....	16
Methodology .....	23
Research Design .....	23
Benefits of Practice-led Research to the Project .....	24
Reflective Practice as Research Methodology .....	26
Material Culture Studies as an Approach to View the Research .....	30
Employing Research Methods .....	33
A Blog as Digital Ethnography.....	34
Digital Questionnaires as Informal Interviews .....	35
A Visual Diary – Notes to Self about Fashion Design and Diversity .....	36
Creative Work Production- The Niches: <i>The Condition of My Appearance</i> .....	38
A Contextual Scan .....	40
The Significance of Appearance.....	40
How Appearance Is Managed In The Everyday .....	40
<i>Social Identity</i> .....	43
<i>Performativity: The Theatrics of Image Management</i> .....	46
<i>The Role of Dress as Social Identification</i> .....	50
<i>Influences on Contemporary Women’s Clothing Choices</i> .....	58

<i>Theme 1: The emotional power of clothing.....</i>	<i>59</i>
<i>Theme 2: Clothing and its effect on body image.....</i>	<i>60</i>
<i>Theme 3: How others perceive us through our choice of clothes.....</i>	<i>61</i>
<i>Theme 4: How we use clothes to project parts of our identity. ....</i>	<i>63</i>
<b>Key Discoveries .....</b>	<b>65</b>
<b>The Niches: The Condition of my Appearance .....</b>	<b>68</b>
We are not the same... ..	73
In this time... ..	75
In this body... ..	78
<b>Conclusion .....</b>	<b>81</b>
<b>Appendix A: Digital Questionnaire Sample Response .....</b>	<b>83</b>
<b>Appendix B: Informal Interview Questions .....</b>	<b>90</b>
<b>Appendix C: Questionnaire Responses .....</b>	<b>93</b>
<b>Appendix D: Visual Diary for Reflective Practice .....</b>	<b>99</b>
Notes to Self about Fashion Design and Diversity .....	99
<i>Condition 1: We are not the same... ..</i>	<i>101</i>
<i>Condition 2: In this place.....</i>	<i>103</i>
<i>Condition 3: In this time.....</i>	<i>115</i>
<i>Condition 4: In this body.....</i>	<i>125</i>
<i>Condition 5- in this dysphoria... ..</i>	<i>134</i>

## Table of Figures

<i>Figure 1: Bubble-Up Vs Trickle Down Models of Clothing Adoption- Developed from Marshall et al. (2012, 54) Fashion Adoption Theories.....</i>	<i>55</i>
<i>Figure 3: Interview Participant's Profiles.....</i>	<i>65</i>
<i>Figure 5: Personal Collection of Metal, Wood and Papier-Mâché Niches from Mexico 1990 trip.....</i>	<i>70</i>
<i>Figure 6: We are not the same... ..</i>	<i>73</i>
<i>Figure 7: in this time... ..</i>	<i>75</i>
<i>Figure 8: in this body.....</i>	<i>78</i>
<i>Figure 9: Title page, visual diary .....</i>	<i>99</i>
<i>Figure 10: Dear Self.....</i>	<i>100</i>
<i>Figure 11: We are not the same .....</i>	<i>101</i>
<i>Figure 12: What are clothes without a body? .....</i>	<i>102</i>
<i>Figure 13: In this place.....</i>	<i>104</i>
<i>Figure 14: White woman in black fella's candy .....</i>	<i>105</i>
<i>Figure 15: Birds of a feather .....</i>	<i>106</i>
<i>Figure 16: This is how I look, this is how you think I look! .....</i>	<i>107</i>
<i>Figure 17: Now I am in a circus but in my land I am a queen.....</i>	<i>108</i>
<i>Figure 18: It is illusion, it is not me... ..</i>	<i>109</i>
<i>Figure 19: "KISS" geisha .....</i>	<i>110</i>
<i>Figure 20: I am a child of multi-cultcha! .....</i>	<i>111</i>
<i>Figure 21: Calling Hijabistas for fashion shoot. ....</i>	<i>112</i>
<i>Figure 22: Glorify the very things we have lost. ....</i>	<i>113</i>
<i>Figure 23: I am terrazzo. The future of ethnicity is multi cultural, multi racial, multi faith... ..</i>	<i>114</i>
<i>Figure 24: In this time.....</i>	<i>116</i>
<i>Figure 25: I am old, not invisible! .....</i>	<i>117</i>
<i>Figure 26: Inside every older person is a younger person wondering what the hell happened.....</i>	<i>118</i>
<i>Figure 27: I remember this coat, it was my grandmother, it was her!.....</i>	<i>119</i>
<i>Figure 28: Hymn to Her.....</i>	<i>120</i>
<i>Figure 29: You should be filled with gold. ....</i>	<i>121</i>
<i>Figure 30: Like you are now, I was once young, I had friends, I danced, I loved... ..</i>	<i>122</i>
<i>Figure 31: I am me, she is her, but we are the same inside and out.....</i>	<i>123</i>

<i>Figure 32: I won't fade away, I am beautiful I have style, I have grace...</i>	124
<i>Figure 33: In this body...</i>	125
<i>Figure 34: We are average women, are we not?</i>	126
<i>Figure 35: Normal Jean "Barbie" Doll</i>	127
<i>Figure 36: Visual representation in advertising and visual merchandising is a reflection of society...not!</i>	128
<i>Figure 37: Don't be like the rest of them darling X</i>	129
<i>Figure 38: Does my butt look big in this... no really, I love my curves!</i>	130
<i>Figure 39: As the sands of time... so are the days of our lives.</i>	131
<i>Figure 40: Intervention</i>	132
<i>Figure 41: Come on, dare you, challenge you to show me a real man...coz a fake man wouldn't want this?</i>	133
<i>Figure 42: In this dysphoria</i>	135
<i>Figure 43: Which gender has the power, that's who I'll be</i>	136
<i>Figure 44: It's my way of being free</i>	137
<i>Figure 45: Gender is so 15 mins of fame!</i>	138
<i>Figure 46: I am happy like this, no really...</i>	139
<i>Figure 47: Flowers, lace and frocks</i>	140

## Abstract

Regardless of gender, race, or social class, dressing and being dressed is one act common to most people. The extent to which individual women participate in “dress” can vary widely. This research project explores “social negotiation” (Loschek 2009) that sees dress used to style a personal and appropriate public image in ‘everyday’ situations. This is presented as a practice-led exegesis, and through a series of creative works that frame a reflective response to the research.

In drawing on reflective practice and material culture theories, the project places the act of getting dressed at its core. The research seeks to identify and gain insight into the external influences and internal motivations of a small group of Australian women. The work is then presented in a triptych of artefacts or *Niches*, which serve as artistic representations of key findings.

As a clothing designer, the works and their associated creative processes inform my practice. The research suggests dynamic ways to view the design process and provides illumination into personal branding and image management.

## Keywords

Dress, clothing, fashion, design, appearance, image, identity, personal branding, reflective practice, practice-led research, practitioner/researcher, material culture, artefacts

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## Signed Statement of Originality

The work contained in this thesis has not been previously submitted to meet requirements for an award at this or any other higher education institution. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made.

QUT Verified Signature

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: 11 August, 2015

## Definitions

**Clothing** Garments collectively; raiment, clothes, apparel, covering<sup>1</sup>

**Clothing designer** - One who works in the initial development phase of the fashion cycle. The tasks carried out by a clothing designer may include-

- Researching trends through comparative shopping, attending fabric fairs and trade shows, as well as following media, music and other social influences
- Creating storyboards and product ranges
- Drawing up specifications for costing and sampling
- Sourcing fabric and trimmings
- Working with pattern cutters and sample machinists
- Approving samples
- And visiting manufacturers<sup>2</sup>

**Dress-** In this project the term dress is used to describe the items and the act of selecting clothing to be worn on any given day. The term dress will include clothing, apparel, garb; ornaments or adornment of the body; everyday or functional modes of dress<sup>3</sup>

**Everyday** The content of the notion of daily life expands or contracts with one's preferred definition, but it typically encompasses such commonplace activities as eating, sleeping, getting dressed, working, home-making, and routine forms of travel, as well as the elaborate rituals, taboos, protocols, performances, and other symbolic activities that encircle and define them<sup>4</sup>. It is a concept often referred to in Cultural Studies, and is used by Goffman to locate various acts of daily life.

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<sup>1</sup> (Fraik 2009)

<sup>2</sup> (Meadows 2009)

<sup>3</sup> (Fraik 2009)

<sup>4</sup> (Felski 2002)



**Fashion-** A prevailing custom or style of dress, etiquette, procedure; a shared and internalised sense of the modish style of the time<sup>5</sup>

**Image-** Image is the external appearance that develops from an individual's abstract calculation, beneath which the wearer's true character may go unrecognised. By designing their body, a person projects or communicates his construct of self to the outside world<sup>6</sup>

**Niche-** These objects are styled on the Mexican Folk Art objects known as *Nichos*. They are made as offerings for religious or special events. They serve as objects of reflection or contemplation, often containing objects that may have belonged to a deceased family member or friend. The term niche is borrowed from architecture where it describes a small hollow or recess in a wall or other solid architecture element<sup>7</sup>.

**Performativity-** For Erving Goffman, performativity can be defined as all the activities of a given participant on a given occasion, which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants. This performance draws on verbal, and non-verbal aspects of identity construction<sup>8</sup>. Judith Butler applies performativity to gender, suggesting gender is a stylized repetition of acts, an imitation or miming of the dominant conventions of gender<sup>9</sup>. Jennifer Craik suggests individuals perform their identities and social roles through their choice and mode of wearing clothes and accessories<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> (Craik 2009)

<sup>6</sup> (Loschek 2009)

<sup>7</sup> (Stokstad, Grayson and Addiss 1995)

<sup>8</sup> (Goffman 1971)

<sup>9</sup> (Butler 1999)

<sup>10</sup> (Craik 2009)

**Social Negotiation-** Loschek suggests that part of clothing's role is to create social identity and that the use of particular clothes to create a specific image is a form of social negotiation. Fashion, costumes and uniforms-as socially negotiated forms of clothing-make a person into a social addressor. In order to be addressed as a human being, socially negotiated body styling is necessary<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> (Loschek 2009)

## Preface

### How the maker became the meaning maker

The work I do, and have done for over thirty years in Australian and global markets, as a clothing designer working in womenswear is essentially driven by “How” questions<sup>12</sup>. How do I make that shirt look right? How do I cut the pattern for volume in a particular sleeve shape I like? How does the colour lab-dip need to be corrected for the perfect shade of blood red? How does that garment fit in terms of comfort and functionality? How can I achieve a certain effect in the fabric manipulation and still bring the style in on budget? The answers to these questions are resolved through experimentation and experience. Changes made to the design and the toile, the development sample of the garment, are iterative. The designs emerge from doing, then being analysed as to their success. If change is required, it is implemented in the design studio. It is tried on the fit model; the team consult and then act upon the model’s feedback. The model’s feedback is technical, her body trained to feel the tightness of a sleeve or the lack of ease across her shoulder. The process repeats until the garment matches the ideal developed in the designer’s mind and is put to paper as a two-dimensional form.

This continues into the three-dimensional form until it is right. Knowing when it is right is the result of technical training in design and apparel engineering, along with many years of industrial experience. Describing *right* is difficult, as it is a subjective state only immediately apparent to the designer and her team. As Michael Polyani (1997, 136) suggests, “we can know more than we can tell.” Perhaps there is a formal criteria a design needs to fulfil, such as how it meets the needs of the wearer in terms of comfort, affordability and wearability or how it matches to the initial sketch drawn out on paper for the design studio team to view and discuss. Then there is the materiality of it; its form now constructed in

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<sup>12</sup> Along side being an educator in the fashion discipline of two of Australia’s universities, I continue to work as consultant and freelance designer in several capacities.

fabric, with openings and fastenings, and detailed embellishment that might appeal or not appeal to the potential customer in mind.

I see fashion design as a manifestation of a visual concept. What is impossible to know is how someone else will view it or like it. To some degree, the process of creating a design theme or concept remains grounded in a technical realm, confined by the challenge of “How to make something look like it did in my mind?” Yet there is another less tangible or less materialistic concern that demands consideration in the design process. This intangible ‘concern’ places demands on the design’s success that cannot be measured or addressed in terms of formal or technical principles or the elements of good design. The intangible concern underlies the way a garment “performs” for the wearer once purchased, and usually far away from the design studio. This notion was brought into sharp realisation when in 2011 and 2012 I was asked to consult and provide styling tips through a series of specifically designed workshops delivered to a small group of thirty women from a Queensland Government public service department as part of a series of professional development activities.

During these interactive participatory workshops, called *The Wardrobe Warriors*, clients were guided through a series of exercises aimed to help them identify appropriate styles of clothing to best suit their body shape, their personalities and the practicalities demanded of their clothing in the roles they performed at work<sup>13</sup>. The participants were predominantly Anglo-Saxon women, aged between thirty to sixty years and who lived in South East Queensland. The welcome diversion from my usual design role to that of stylist shifted the routine “How” questions towards a significant set of “Why” questions, which arose as the women shared anecdotes about the condition of their wardrobes. I began to see their relationship with clothes in a very different light, and certainly in contrast to the way I view my own positive relationship with clothes. For most of the women in *The Wardrobe Warrior* workshops this relationship with clothing was

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<sup>13</sup> *The Wardrobe Warriors* name was used only in context of a private consultation contract, and applies in particular to this client and product.

described as stressful, demanding, and, in some cases, items of clothing were linked to major moments of disappointment in their lives.

Hearing these and other concerns, such as how items from the wardrobe can promote or provoke different emotions for the wearer, and how clothing choices affected their participation in certain events, drew my attention away from regarding the success of a garment in terms of traditional design principles to the challenges women face as they choose their daily outfit, the process noted by Ingrid Loschek (2009, 25) as a form of social “negotiation”.

The Wardrobe Warriors spoke of their clothing with an emotion attached, such as my happy pants, or the green jumper keeps me grounded. Later, in my formal research data-gathering tool, a participant described a small blue dinosaur hair clip as an item of emotional empowerment worn when in court and which sits proudly in her wardrobe alongside her barrister’s wig and black gown<sup>14</sup>. That same dinosaur inspired the title of this research project.

My first response was to try harder to make the women feel better about themselves through standard flattery, but when realizing the issues raised crossed from body image and aging to gender roles and identification, it became clear the clothing merely served as an accompanying accessory to the experiences the women described. This brief opportunity provided a moment to fundamentally shift my position from designer to stylist and wardrobe consultant, and resulted in providing the catalyst to engage in academic research into the relationship between clothing and the wearer and how this relationship is negotiated. It should be noted here that I am also an educator, with a strong interest in the teaching of clothing design practice and how it can be improved. I work in the higher education sector in the fashion discipline.

The Wardrobe Warriors is not included in this project. The consultancy was completed prior to the initiation of this study, but its activity played a key role in its instigation. As well as informing and influencing my thinking before and

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<sup>14</sup> See Appendix A for sample of responses to questionnaires from the research project.

throughout the investigation, it provided a key starting point. This exegesis therefore documents the research project, *There's a Dinosaur in My Armoire: A Creative Exploration of Women's Dress Choice* and illustrates my shift from maker to meaning maker.

## Introduction

For some, getting dressed in the morning is fraught with angst. There is great difficulty in choosing a suitable outfit to cover all the roles they will experience in a day, such as mother, wife, and business colleague with professional workplace expectations. From personal experience, and from a significant number of years in the Textile, Clothing and Footwear (TCF) Industry sector<sup>15</sup>, I know that women are deeply concerned about looking less than 'right', particularly where what is 'right' is incredibly difficult to describe or define. It seems, however, relatively easy for women to describe the 'wrong'. This research offers a metaphorical response to where the eliminating of what is 'wrong' allows a woman (particularly those women who participated in the workshops noted in the preface) to get close to what would be 'right'. The scrutiny of their wardrobes, the agony of outfit selection and the desperate seeking of a friend's advice can all be contributing factors in the elimination process.

Where fashion is considered as the "prevailing custom or style of dress, etiquette, procedure: a shared and internalized sense of the modish style of the time" (Craik 2009, 3), dress, clothing and fashion are often used interchangeably. Jennifer Craik (Craik 2009), used here as an authority in the field, describes the concept of dress as "Clothing, apparel, garb; ornaments of the body; everyday or functional modes of dress". Craik (2009, 3) then defines clothing as something more collective than individual, identifying it as "raiment, clothes, apparel, covering".

This research project is less concerned with 'fashion' and more interested in asking of, and about, the relationship between purpose, function and good design of a piece of clothing or dress. It considers questions such as, what purpose do these I design serve for the wearer? What reasons contribute to the wearer feeling anxious in choosing their clothes each day? Why does the wearer feel uncomfortable with their appearance? And what does this say about our

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<sup>15</sup> *Textiles, Clothing and Footwear and allied industries sits within the Australian Manufacturing sector (2001)*

expectations of our clothes and what we need them to do for us? It translates my own informed, tacit responses in a series of artefacts which metaphorically represent my own reflections and draw a line under the findings.

At this point it is important to note the distinction between identity and image. Svendsen (2006, 19) suggests identity is a concept of traditions, whereas consumption, or the ability to buy a new look, has shifted identity away from traditional aspects of social, religious and cultural representations leaving way for fashion or clothing to manipulate image. Our social self is conveyed through our appearance, some aspects of which cannot be changed, but many aspects, such as hair colour, style, eye colour, can be manipulated to mask our natural self (Craik 2009, 3). The way one moves and walks can be altered or affected to create an impression. While these types of manipulations are very closely linked to our identity, it is consideration of the practice of image-making that informs this project. The act of careful and conscientious construction of how one appears, through clothing and adornment, is central to the research. Although this study speaks to women's experiences and identities, it is their relationship, specifically with dress, and individual clothing artefacts in particular, rather than the inherent representations of their gender, that are significant here.

A contributing factor in the "social negotiation" (Loschek 2009) of dressing is the use of clothes as part of a performance, a way to support the various roles women play on their day. This idea of performativity has been applied elsewhere, including in gender studies in the work of Judith Butler (1999) and Simone De Beauvoir (1989), but Craik's description suggests, "individuals perform their identities and social roles through their choice and mode of wearing clothes and accessories" (2009, 3). This offers a practical level of function in terms of this project, and is arguably a more apt usage of the term for the purpose of this research. Performativity in the sense it is used here is a contribution to how clothes make the woman in the study move or feel and it is a further enactment of identity expression. This expression of identity is touched by many traditional characteristics of identity construction, such as culture, social status and class, race and gender, body image (positive and negative),



aging and a sense of individuality. Expansive discussion on these concepts and the body of theory that surrounds them is beyond the scale and scope of this project.

I am a woman. This study is about women and their appearance. I am a clothing designer with thirty years of industry experience and I am a teacher of fashion design. I am sensitive and compassionate to the findings, and the natural bias and concerns that emerged in the research. My understandings and findings are therefore captured through a theoretical framework as a reflective practitioner. That does not preclude that I too try to make meaning of the issues around dress and identity myself. The identity of the practitioner, in this instance, is something that infuses itself throughout the project and adds greater authenticity to the creative works as articulations of the responses of women, shared by women amongst women.

Becoming aware, through the processes of reflective practice theory, of the role of clothing in *everyday* life to understand the implicit value systems women tend to place on particular items is developed from three-way communication, which is reciprocal interaction between the designer, the object and viewer” (Loschek 2009). It is most interesting when we hear about clothing from the wearer’s point of view or, as Loschek (2009) suggest, engage with the “complex value concepts in art and fashion [that] are never transferred from the object to the viewer via contemplation alone; they are negotiated or mediated in a communicative way”. It is these tensions which prompted reflection on, and in, my practice (Schön 1983).

This practice-led research project has two closely linked components: this exegesis and the creative practice. The first, this exegesis document, *There Is A Dinosaur In My Armoire: A Creative Exploration Of Women’s Dress Choice*, frames the research project and highlights the creative outcomes. It seeks to contextualise and address the following research question.

*How do Australian women use clothing to fashion a (performed) public image and what is the effects of this on their everyday life?*

*Methodology*, provides the theoretical framework, and discusses the three methodological theories engaged in the research. Practice-led theory was used in combination with an expansive professional practice to critically reflect on, and interpret, the data which influences the creative works. Reflective practice theory and tools are used to illuminate the nuanced data and make explicit that which was implicit to the practitioner/researcher. The role these frameworks play is explained by, and context is given to, the historical development of them.

Drawing from the key ideas in literature related to these theoretical frameworks, *Employing research methods* shows how those methods were applied within the project. This section describes qualitative data collection, such as digital interviews and questionnaires (as outlined in Appendix A: Digital Questionnaires and Appendix B: Informal Interview Questions). It also discusses how reflective practice was applied to the project through engagement with a visual diary. The reflective process of journaling, and the creative works, considers and responds to the interview responses and online blog submissions through reflection, and these ideas are explored through the construction of the creative works.

A *contextual scan* discusses the philosophical frameworks of Material Culture theory. Certain aspects of Material Culture theory are used in this project as a means to understand relationships and to demonstrate meaning through the construction of the created as a result of the discoveries of the research. Berger suggests, "Cultural values and beliefs take form or are manifested in objects (2009, 17). Roland Barthes attempted to create a vestimentary language code in his book *System de la Mode*, or *The Fashion System*, first published in 1967, to provide a way of looking at visual communication to help make meaning through a created code of language. Barthes, with a linguist background, links the meaning of image with text, and considers it to be "dependant on text" (Kress

and Van Leeuwen 1996, 18) to refine and confirm the meaning offered. This is known as semiotics.

The project's key findings are discussed and highlighted in *Key Discoveries*, where the responses to the questionnaires are used to illuminate the responses of the women. These critical responses are shown to demonstrate the issues tackled in the creative process.

*The Niches: Conditions of my Appearance* examines the creative practice, the series of objects that metaphorically draw upon “semiotic orientations” (Küchler and Miller 2005, 20) derived as observations from the analysis of the artefacts. Understanding signs and the communication model-source-sender-channel-message-receiver (Guillemette 2006) is a key element in the creative process; and Umberto Eco's notion that signs, “transmit information; to say or indicate a thing that someone knows and wants others to know as well” (1976, 27). The use of “sign function” (Eco 1981) allows signals to be sent through non-verbal or textual messages also. This can be seen in certain items of clothing that are given meaning. According to Eco, “If signs were not endowed with a certain text-oriented meaning, metaphors would not work, and every metaphor would only say that a thing is a thing” (1981, 37).

This project uses metaphor as a way to draw attention to particular signifiers in the creative works. In the visual diary, a series of hand stamped images representing mind, heart and body are used to indicate the author's reflective responses. In the niches, several signifiers attempt to work as metaphors for the fashion design process, or the studio, through the use of various trade specific tools like the use of a body in simplified mannequin form, sewing machines, and needles with yarn. These subtle visual cues are a way of creating a language unique to this project, but which resonate with the viewer.

*The Conclusion* ends the exegesis by noting the impact the research has had on my practice as a designer and educator, and identifies opportunities for further research.

The second component of *There's a Dinosaur in my Armoire* is the creative work, which is a triptych of small objects, or Niches, titled "The condition of my appearance" which brings to light some of the women's critical responses. The term "niche" is borrowed here from architecture, where it describes a "small hollow or recess in a wall or other solid architecture element"(Stokstad, Grayson and Addiss 1995, 725). Used literally, this term may not clearly apply; instead, the niches act as metaphors, a three-dimensional representation of some of the key issues highlighted by the research. Giving these issues a physical form speaks to the materiality of dress and, in this case, specifically addresses the conditions described by the participants, and, as such, allows the women's critical responses to emerge in a physical, metaphoric form that creates a sense of universality to their often unique, yet simultaneously very common, concerns. The power of metaphoric images provides opportunity for the niches to speak to all women who wear clothes, not only the women involved in this research process. These niches<sup>16</sup> are informed by the contents of a visual diary, "Notes to self about fashion design and diversity" (see Appendix D), which was used as a reflective journaling tool, a place where consideration is given to various themes that emerged from interview responses and written submission obtained in the course of the research, which began in 2013. Fiona Dieffenbacher describes a visual diary as, "a visual record of thoughts, experiences and reflections surrounding the topic"(Dieffenbacher 2013, 212). Here, photographic images and memes found on social media are grouped together to form small visual themes, creating a visual narrative similar to a mood board used in fashion design product development. This random collection of images is of a curated nature, and may only hold meaning to the individual practitioner. In this instance, the visual diary was an integral tool in the development of the creative work, as it played a significant role in the creation of metaphoric images to articulate the results of the data collection process.

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<sup>16</sup> Examples may be seen in the chapter "The Niches: The Condition of my Appearance"

The next section of this exegesis will discuss the methodology behind the project, and will contextualize practice-led research, reflective practice theory and material culture to demonstrate how it was applied to the project.

## Methodology

### Research Design

This section explains the methodology used to conduct the research for this project. This practice-led research project was developed in response to questions that emerged from my work as a designer of clothing for women. I used a qualitative research design; that is, I placed the research and data collection in context, and the setting of the research question is, as Flynn and Foster (2009, 3) describe, a “natural setting, the real world”. The results are framed within my practice, the work I do and have done for over 30 years as a designer within the American and Australian fashion industries. To help make sense of the problem, particular sets of theories were stitched together to inform the research, and in this sense the research is multi-modal. First, I will introduce the methodological theories used to inform the project: practice-led research, reflective practice theory, and material culture.

The research methodology and methods selected for the data collection loosely follow the idea of concept, construct, model and theory development. According to Flynn and Foster (2009), “To work with these terms allows a researcher to form a structure for studying research methods for the fashion industry”. Defining the research question began with the following working hypothesis: Contemporary women use clothing to create an image, one they choose to present to the public. As the project evolved, it emerged that the aim was to understand the more specific question of what process of selection determines what garments a women will choose to wear on a particular, but ‘everyday’, occasion?” Therefore the aim of the research is to identify what influences those decisions. In the next section I will explain how the problem was identified.

## Benefits of Practice-led Research to the Project

This project uses practice-led research in several ways. Initially, the development of a blog site where image and text were combined to produce a site for narrative and data collection was set up, a form of digital communication used in the fashion industry. Next, a reflective journal captured thoughts and responses to the research. This is not unlike a visual diary used in the design process. Finally, the artefacts themselves were produced, the results from reflective practice. The niches are the product.

Practice-based research and practice-led research are two types of inquiry where the researcher/practitioner is “central to the inquiry as is the context in which the research is taking place”(2009). When the practitioner is researching the practice itself, the tendency is for the research to be more based in the practice and therefore led or driven by the practice itself. This is known as practice-led research. In comparison to practice-led research, practice-based research may be more focused on observing and critically analysing the practice as an outside observer. Gray and Malins (Gray 1995, 3) argue:

critical analysis and debate, and the formulation of theoretical and philosophical frameworks is the responsibility not only of the “external” critic, historian or theoretician, but essentially the responsibility of the craftsperson.

Practice-led research, as Bugg (1993, 2) suggests, provides an opportunity to discover through “doing”. As a fashion practitioner, the “doing” needed to align with the practice of fashion design, and whilst honouring the academy’s research framework, it remained critical to me that my research remain relevant to my practice, and that my work as a clothing designer drive the project. Here, embedding theory in the practice elevated my research from simple “trying to do a better job” to trying to understand the complexity of the problem in a way that others may benefit from and ensuring others can easily access the results. But,

although it was important to make my findings general, it is sometimes the uniqueness of the practitioner's experience that can highlight important aspects of findings, or probe out particular curiosities in the research problem.

The decision to use a practice-led methodology in this project allowed me to link theory with practice in a meaningful way, adding a greater dimension to my understanding of the relationship women develop with clothing, while still conforming to the academic expectations of rigour and robustness. Barbara Bolt suggests practice-led research must stand up to the critique of any research methodology, should be able to be defined, should demonstrate protocols and procedures and "withstand scrutiny" (2004, 21). Bolt describes using the tacit knowledge of the practitioner to show a specific point of view through a material understanding of the problem and by "demonstrating the material nature of visual thinking" (in Barrett 2010, 29).

The process of reflection, as Finlay and Gough (in Barrett 2010) describe, highlighted the need for reflexivity, and in order to implement engaged research, my personal responses to the research became embedded in the process of reflection. Feeling and responding emotionally to the data caused a critical shift in my thinking and making. This shift meant moving away from considering design for commercial purposes and allowing myself as researcher to understand the research participant's particular and unique situations and circumstances from an experiential position. I had to detach myself from the trained analytical clothing designer who technically understood and evaluated the garments' merits and, as Finlay and Gough describe, apply a more introverted "critical gaze" (2007, 1) to myself and my practice.

The requirement for the practitioner-researcher to be reflexive made it necessary to develop a considered and somewhat systematic approach to make explicit what I was thinking, feeling and learning. I drew upon reflective practice theory to make clear my tacit knowledge, using journaling and the creative components to demonstrate that process through reflexivity.



The next section builds on the importance of reflection and reflexivity in practice-led research and demonstrates how it was useful to the project.

### **Reflective Practice as Research Methodology**

In reflective practice we learn by thinking about things that have happened to us and by trying to see them in a different way, which enables us to take some kind of action (2007). Reflexivity, on the other hand, can be described as the kind of relationship that develops between the cause and the effect of our actions. Each of us is challenged with choice in the tools we use to guide or encourage our reflective processes, something Schön (Finlay and Gough 2007, 3) describes as “a predicament for the practitioner who must choose among multiple approaches to practice or devise his own way of combining them”. Combining intuitive, tacit knowledge and reflective practice benefits the research findings.

Reflective practice is a helpful methodology for the study of dress and fashion, providing opportunities to engage simple commentaries, descriptive essays, and anecdotes on fashion and dress, and link them to empirical research (1983). Whilst the practitioner–researcher is using the process of reflection to analyse and respond to the research, it should be noted that reflection is also the process the participants describe themselves as using in choosing their outfits, both for selection or elimination. If we see reflective practice as learning and developing through examining what we think happened on any occasion and how we think others perceived the event and us, we are opening our selves to scrutiny by others. Being open to the scrutiny of others could prove very helpful, yet it could also prove problematic, for both the practitioner and the participants in this research project. This cause and effect cycle of evaluation and subsequent actions mimics how the participants in the research described their daily clothing selection process.

As Schön suggests, it is important for the practitioner to bring reflection into daily practice within the studio to avoid “technical-rationality” (Kawamura 2011, 3). For Schön, the practitioner who only focuses on the technical application of

their craft or skills is not wholly engaging in the practice. Instead, Schön places emphasis on understanding and implementing reflection as it occurs in practice (during the process as the product is evolving) and says it is as important as reflection on action (reflection about the action itself) (Schön 1983). Doloughan suggests Schön sees no separation between reflection on the process and reflection on the product, referring to this as the language of design (1983). Schön states:

[t]he practitioner allows himself to experience surprise, puzzlement, or confusion in a situation, which he finds uncertain or unique. He reflects on the phenomenon before him, and on the prior understandings, which have been implicit in his behaviour. He carries out an experiment, which serves to generate both a new understanding of the phenomenon and a change in the situation.

(1983, 68)

As the professional practice of fashion benefits from reflection and reflexivity, the research process benefits from both the use of reflective practice as a means to explore, analyse and respond to the process of research and its subsequent findings, and reflexivity as a way of processing the value of the information gathered. In this case, the cycle of research has been informed by several methods of reflection, namely: writing reflectively on the blog and the creation of the visual journal; developing appropriate data gathering tools and then analysing the data by distilling it through the understanding gained via the creative expression of journaling, and making the niches as creative output to support this submission. Margaret Archer (2002, 61) suggests reflexivity has three key steps in the process: firstly, self-monitoring; secondly, self-awareness; and thirdly, self-conscious recognition. In this sense, reflexivity applies to the process of choice and selection in the images used, and in the captions. This is not unlike the design selection process, where large numbers of inspirational sources are gathered and then narrowed through a process of determining both the relevance and the impact they may have on the design outcomes. It could be

likened to the development of the reflective journal and the key elements used in the niches.

Bolton (2010, 1) suggests reflective practice “gives validity, form and coherence over time and space, and aesthetic illumination”. Through writing we can understand stories and create stories, and through doing this, we are able to make sense of our world (1983, 68), and by taking us out of our normal or everyday role, it also helps us to make sense of ourselves by seeing problems and issues from various viewpoints. Bolton suggests this could be seen “as harnessing a vital human drive – to create stories about our lives and communicate them” (Bolton 2010, xvi). This idea of creating narrative through words is also valuable to the designer, and in this sense it applies to visualisation, as in, for example, the reflective journal created for this project. Looking at gathered images and discerning meaning from them in a semiotic sense is similar to a model of reflection that Bolton calls “through the looking glass model” (Bolton 2010, 2), which involves more than “me out there looking at me in here”, but is instead a dynamic actively creative approach that harnesses the dynamism of reflexivity. This model opens the practitioner to reflexivity, which Bolton describes as finding strategies for looking at our own thought processes, values, prejudices and habitual actions as if we were onlookers. An aesthetic experience (such as writing or visualisation through creative practice) can link the practitioner to new ideas and bring greater unity to the experience (2010, 4). Out of this reflection, critical issues for the women were identified and then, through reflexivity, the metaphors emerged that would be carried through into the niche development. The selected imagery makes reference to comments the women made, and thus semiotic meaning is built through layers of materials and forms that reference this.

This process of reflection enables us to interrogate both our explicit knowledge, such as known and quantifiable evidence-based knowledge, and implicit knowledge. Such reflection might lead to insight about something not noticed before, pinpointing perhaps a critical detail. Reflection and reflexivity encourage the practitioner to develop strategies for looking at their own thought processes,

value, prejudices and habitual actions (Bolton 2010, 5). In this study, they are also crucial tools for evaluating the stories and voices of others. McIntosh (Bolton 2010, 7) notes the importance of a critically reflexive approach to research, in allowing claims regarding validity of knowledge within a particular domain to be examined and contested. McIntosh (2010) goes on to suggest that critical reflection helps to generate new ways of thinking, seeing and acting.

Practice-led research and reflective practice are very complementary, providing a strong framework for the project to develop. Both allowed me as the practitioner to make clear the process of research, as will be demonstrated further when I discuss the methods used in gathering data for the project. The final aspect of the methodology involves the role of the clothing itself, using material culture to place focus on the garments the women spoke of in the research and creating an understanding of the significance of particular items of clothing to these women.

## Material Culture Studies as an Approach to View the Research

The women who took part in the research project felt particular items of clothing, dress and various objects of adornment signalled details of their internal self, and provided messages about who they were. These women felt a strong link between the objects (how they looked and felt in a physical sense) and between the less clear but just as significant way the garments affected their emotions. This suggests the objects were capable of creating a sense of emotional transformation (comfort, acceptance, wellbeing, happiness). Corrigan (2010) suggests that clothing can be viewed in two ways: in terms of its concrete physical form, or as an “element, in some greater conceptual scheme transcending its materiality” and believes this relationship between the two ways of looking at clothing is central to the way we make sense of the world we live in. I have sought to explore this relationship through the field of study known as material culture.

A range of fields such as art history, architecture and anthropology use material culture studies to provide information from objects or artefacts about the way we live, or have lived in the past through the things we have created. Berger (2010, 33) describes the suitability of the objects or artefact's as the “material” by one key criteria: “relatively simple objects showing human workmanship”. Berger (2009, 16) suggests material culture refers to things people make and purchase and as such he places it firmly in consumer culture. Tilley (2009) states, “Material culture studies might be regarded as an academic manifestation of characterizations of our contemporary cultural condition as ‘postmodern’, involving indeterminacy, immanence or becoming, ambiguity, heterodoxy and pluralism”. Tilley further suggests the “material” and the “cultural” are basically opposed – think physical versus intellectual. Consider fashion design as an example of intellectual design; it is not purely decorative, it holds a certain responsibility that the outcome be wearable, and useable in some way for the wearer. It is designed with intention of both use and purpose; it is not placed on a wall to be viewed, and it must address practical criteria to some degree.

However, there are also more ephemeral elements, such as emotional and aesthetic appeal, which should be considered within the design's success measures. In terms of material culture, the objects chosen by a society represent their likes, preferences or taste. This provides a powerful lens to view the values certain groups hold and insight into their lives.

Küchler and Miller (2009, 16) use material culture theory for their studies of clothing as a way to blend two views: one, the study of what is materially there – in this case the fabrics, the buttons the threads of decoration –and the second, the study of the social life of the garment. They suggest:

[t]he dissection of clothing into pattern, fibre, form and production is not opposed to, but part of, its consideration as an aspect of human and cosmological engagement. The sensual and the aesthetic – what cloth feels and looks like – is the source of its capacity to objectify myth, cosmology and also morality, power and values (2005).

This illustrates how material culture provides an ideal lens to use for this study, as it honours that very unique relationship between the wearer's experience and the object itself as was identified in the research. My search for the missing link between the professional considerations of a successful design and how women select clothes based on their desire to present specific aspects of themselves draws on Küchler and Miller's (Küchler and Miller 2005) use of material culture in examining the links between the design, the finished garment, the materials used to make it with the way those all combine to provide the wearer with an experience, something they consider each time they reach for that piece of clothing. The wearer begins to store memories of occasions, and how the garment 'performed' in that situation. Here the criterion, wearability and the way it performs their identity begins to develop substance and has a measurable set of values. Material culture then becomes a lens to view the information received from the research.

Applying material culture to this research project acknowledges the subject/object relationship and therefore offers a lens under which to understand the nuanced connection between particular items of dress and the wearer.

## Employing Research Methods

The methods used in the research were based on mixed qualitative research data gathering methods, and are based in ethnographical approaches, meaning the researcher is embedded in the research community with the participants. In this particular case, that was an online community that developed through participation in a blog, [www.myfrocksrocks.blogspot.com](http://www.myfrocksrocks.blogspot.com)<sup>17</sup> and further engaged virtual relationships via email for interviews and questionnaires.

There are many aspects to qualitative research. This project stitched together several methods of data collection to capture the richness of data. Denzin and Lincoln (2011, 4) suggest that the researcher who uses mixed methods, “like the quilter stitches, edits, and puts slices of reality together,” brings a type of “psychological and emotional unity” to the research experience. Considering the research question posed by this project, which addresses concepts of experience and choice, a qualitative research design was the most appropriate to capture the nuances of the women’s responses as well as to articulate the researcher’s response in the creative work.

In particular, the research data was gathered by four complementary methods. They were:

- Virtual ethnography on a blog site ([myfrocksrocks.blogspot.com](http://myfrocksrocks.blogspot.com))
- Questionnaires
- Journaling as reflective practice (Notes to self about fashion design and diversity)
- The results demonstrated through creative practice; making small three- dimensional objects I have called niches.

Each of these methods is discussed in further detail in the next section.

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<sup>17</sup> This blog-site was specifically developed to gather research data for this project. See Appendix A for sample of responses to digital questionnaire



## A Blog as Digital Ethnography

The blog, whilst being a form of what Flynn and Foster call “auto-ethnographical inquiry” (2009), in that through writing I provided personal examples of something from my own experience, was also a means to prompt and provoke responses from external participants.<sup>18</sup> Of course, the difficulty with using a virtual site is that the identities of the participants cannot always be confirmed. This meant that the information gathered might not have been reliable, as the respondents may have been creating fictional stories, or in fact using a false identity. Denzin and Lincoln (2011) suggest that identity is created in a “situated, face-to-face situation”. According to Denzin and Lincoln, “by contrast, online, the body is absent, and interaction is mediated by computer technology and written discourse” (2011, 418). While anonymity would not have hindered the research, false answers and fake identity would, so another form of qualitative data gathering was required to ensure a reliable approach to data collection took place.

After some time posting and responding to followers on the blog site, I was able to develop several constructs – a construct in this sense being “an idea or notion that is not easily observed” (Denzin and Lincoln 2011, 418). An example of these constructs might be the ideas implicit in attitudes that are often hard to define unless analysed through the act of writing. The blog, [www.myfrocksrocks.blogspot.com](http://www.myfrocksrocks.blogspot.com), became a virtual space to create transparency around the motivations and actions of the women who responded, providing common language around the things that are, as described by Flynn and Foster, “difficult to touch, they are not physical” (2009, 13). Flynn and Foster go on to say, “when communicating about fashion, orally, in writing, or visually, the use of concepts and constructs are included” (2009, 13). For example, the word dress may mean the type of garment that has skirt and bodice joined or all body coverings, or it may be used to mean the clothing and accessories that go to form one’s appearance or as a verb meaning to clothe your body (2009, 13). It became

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<sup>18</sup> See Appendix A for examples of the communication.

apparent through communicating on the blog, and mis-communicating, that the items being discussed needed to have clear definitions. As an example, pants could have described anything from underpants, trousers and jeans, indicating the need to define all items so that the discussion was clearly around the same item, or words like braces, which could apply to a clothing accessory or orthodontic devices to correct misshaped or irregular teeth. While innate to digital communication, this indicates a limitation to this method.

A rigorous questionnaire was developed to probe more deeply and specifically into the relationship between subject (wearer) and object (dress), and the blog site was used to invite participants to answer the questionnaire<sup>19</sup>.

### Digital Questionnaires as Informal Interviews

However, the advantages of digital communication, such as accessibility and convenience, should not be denied. Jumping off from the blog into a more controlled email environment provided a suitable place to conduct interviews to gather specific and targeted answers to questions around issues of traditional identity, such as social class, cultural relevance, self-image and religious beliefs. Open-ended interview questions benefit the researcher in gathering information about topics not well researched or covered in the literature (Flynn and Foster 2009, 13). Giving participants an opportunity to respond to questions in their own words, rather than choosing from prescribed multiple-choice responses, brings richness to a qualitative study. Here a set of questions based on specific concerns identified during blog communications was developed. The purpose of the questionnaire was to delve into “specific constructs” (Kawamura 2011), while building on the research design mentioned earlier. The questions were developed with three key areas in mind:

- Identity issues – a big topic with sociological and psychological implications

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<sup>19</sup> See Appendix A for questions from the blog, and Appendix B to see the questionnaire responses.

- Image issues – questions in this area aimed to understand how clothes helped the participants interact within society
- Clothing as material culture – questions about the clothes themselves, and how people used clothing to adorn themselves.

Ten women participated, and from their responses a profile of key issues emerged. The responses to the open-ended questions formed the basis of the categories that were used in the visual diary, forming the visual aspect of the research and a response to the data through reflective practice. The specific number of ten participants was not planned; it represented all those who volunteered to join in. The women ranged in location but were all situated on the eastern coast of Australia. There were no criteria to meet, just participation and a willingness to share their views. Calls for participation in the questionnaire went out via the blog, [www.myfrocksrocks.blogspot.com](http://www.myfrocksrocks.blogspot.com). Ethical clearance relied on the participants returning, via email, a signed form showing they understood the parameters of the research and that it was clear this research data would be made public.

### **A Visual Diary – Notes to Self about Fashion Design and Diversity**

The design journal, or visual diary, was used as a tool of both reflection and analysis (see Appendix D). The visual diary helped me collect the findings in one place, and to construct categories, as well as being a tool for communicating the findings with others. The title and format are based on a poem I wrote soon after engaging in the project called *Dear Self*<sup>20</sup>. It also provided an opportunity to analyse the images and to reflect upon how I could address the issues raised in the creative work. In determining the key topics that emerged from the blog posts and the questionnaire, the diary provided the creative space to develop and identify the key themes that would be further explored in the creative work of illustration. In that sense it served as a model. Flynn and Foster (2009) describe a model as, “a visual representation of concepts and constructs. It is an

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<sup>20</sup> See Figure 10: *Dear Self*

illustration, pulling ideas together”. The title, “Notes to self about fashion design and diversity”, expresses a direct link between the practice and the research, a link that is sustained through the naming of sections of the visual diary to highlight key aspect of the research. These key topics, which I have labelled “conditions”, and their functions (in parentheses) are as follows:

- We are not the same (which identifies the problem)
- In this place (which explores issues around culture and multiculturalism)
- In this time (which investigates the relationship between self-image and aging)
- In this body (which looks at weight and its relationship to self-image, body image and representation of the body)
- In this dysphoria (in this section issues around gender identification are gathered).

The label ‘Conditions’ implies that something is in a state, and it can be described as good or bad. Consider appearance to be in poor condition or the image is of high quality so is said to be in good condition. These conditions become more relevant when represented in the physical creative works, but as a metaphor in the poem, they serve to objectify what is to follow in the niches. The topics defined as conditions also add to the development of the creative works, in that each layer has meaning and refers back to the verses of the poem through semiotics.

O’Connell and Dymont (2013) suggest that the research journal is a place to record observations and to also “capture the researcher’s thoughts and ideas about the study at that moment in time”. Gaimster (2011) also suggests that visual journals or sketchbooks “often contain collage and text as well as sketches and reflect the artist’s moods or experiences”. The visual diary I used in this project evolved to contain visual and textual data. Opening with a reflective writing activity – the poem tucked inside an envelope – the diary makes an allusion to the notion of something hidden or unseen, but which, upon opening and reading, illuminates the issues in a public way. The diary also includes some found objects, which can perhaps be considered as visual prompts for the

reflective process, but which also provides links to some of the key issues, such as cultural appropriation.

### **Creative Work Production- The Niches: *The Condition of My Appearance***

In this project, the niches<sup>21</sup> – small vignettes styled with props and ephemera – sum up my response to the research data by bringing together the various methods of enquiry to demonstrate the clothing in terms of material culture. The niches are intended to communicate my response to the reflective practice process. The visual outputs demonstrated here through the niches as artefacts, allow the viewer to engage with the data in a meaningful way while placing the work in the context of the researchers field. In this sense, they are, as Flynn and Foster (2009) describe, an “explanation for events”, and they provide the “how” question with some rationale. As such, the choice to create the niches instead of, for example, a clothing collection for this project is strengthened. A creative outcome of clothing would have risked being judged on the grounds of its suitability to be worn and its functionality, but the niches are to be observed and considered beyond the relationship of form and image. They function as a metaphoric response to the data collection, rather than as a clothing design attempting to answer the women’s concerns. The use of objects, not clothing, allow the outcome of the reflective practice to extend beyond the confines of the clothing design, providing an opportunity for the metaphoric playfulness of image to convey the meaning of the data analysis.

This section has discussed the methods used in this project. I have provided my rationale for the choices of methods and the theories adopted, and alluded to the outcomes of the research. The next section introduces key literature that informs the project through a contextual scan. It investigates the significance of appearance in contemporary society through a chronological review of the development of fashion theories and arrives at our present state of image

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<sup>21</sup> See Chapter 5 *The Niches: The Condition of my Appearance*.

management, where I review some of the influences on contemporary women and their clothing choice.

## A Contextual Scan

### The Significance of Appearance

In light of the complex relationship between clothing and our appearance this section will provide a context for the issues raised during the research. It paves the way for understanding the results and links the practice to the research through analysis of the existing relevant literature. Following a brief discussion on dress in the everyday, which serves to delineate fine lines between fashion clothing and dress, the second section looks at the role of clothing in social identification, and provides a chronological overview of key fashion theories related to clothing adoption and how they have evolved in response to changes in contemporary society. These are discussed because fashion theory has mostly emerged from these ideas of clothing adoption and, as such, have a strong impact on how clothing has been viewed in society throughout different time periods. I then discuss the external factors that may have influence on the choices of clothing made by contemporary woman, with the aim of determining why choosing clothes can be a challenge for some women. Finally, the third section explores four critical themes that emerged from the research and which inform the creative works developed for this project.

### How Appearance Is Managed In The Everyday

Dress, clothing and fashion are often used as synonyms, yet each of these terms carries different associations and should not be used interchangeably. Fashion often refers to clothes that are “in fashion” – meaning, they are currently available merchandise that has been generally accepted by consumers as being “new and on trend”. Kawamura describes fashion as that which is “not visual clothing, but is the invisible elements included in clothing” (2004). The difference between fashion and dress, or clothing, is perhaps best understood by

acknowledging that the term 'fashion' is fraught with antagonistic interpretations. Kawamura suggests that clothing becomes fashion when we place on it a particular value, which exists only in people's imaginations and beliefs (2004).

Dress reflects more than a simple choice of three dimensional objects (Kawamura 2004). Dress choice embodies a complex process of selection and elimination, and getting dressed can be a lengthy and angst-ridden time for those who aim to make the right impression (Jackson and Shaw 2006, 1). While this study is informed by a particular interest in clothing, it would be remiss to present only the use of clothes, when, as has already been established, visual appearance is an integral part of creating and presenting 'identity' and the inclusion of jewellery, accessories and beauty products are used by women as a form of visual communication.

Fashion trends are fluid and may quickly change as more and more people accept and adopt them; the use of this term itself implies everything has a time when it is in favour and, hence, it will also have a time when it is out of favour (Roach-Higgins, Eicher and Johnson 1995, 7). The process of adopting new styles is referred to as the fashion adoption cycle<sup>22</sup>. However, engagement with the fashion cycle is not consistent for any one woman or among women; it often fluctuates as women move through various life stages, with different access to financial means, opportunities to purchase fashion and social engagement needs. The choice to focus this study on the everyday, shifts the investigation slightly away from the typical fashion adoption cycle towards the way dress contributes to the wearer's sense of self in a variety of daily roles and situations. The everyday is a concept broadly used in cultural studies, and in this instance refers to the ordinary use of dress for individual women.

In defining the difference between clothing and fashion, Kawamura (2004) suggests that items of clothing must go through the process of transformation to

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<sup>22</sup> The term fashion cycle often refers to the cyclical process product development, production, distribution and marketing, which is seasonal and recurring. In this case, I refer only to the adoption or consumption of clothing. There is further discussion on the fashion adoption cycles later in this section.



be labelled as fashion. She goes on to say that fashion is a belief manifested through clothing. This introduces the notion that fashion is not the clothing itself, but a personal interaction with clothing, and thus could represent emotional aspects of identity. As Loschek (2009) states, “[t]his communication is not realized in one direction but is based on reciprocal interaction between the designer, object and viewer”. This means that when dressing we consider not only our own sense of satisfaction with our appearance, but also that of the people who may view us while we are wearing a particular outfit. Consideration of this sense of projected image (the message we contrive) and perceived image (how our message is received and interpreted) is a thread woven through this project through semiotics and the idea of sender /receiver dynamics in regards to image<sup>23</sup>.

The value of dress is undoubtedly subjective; it is mostly determined in the mind of the wearer. This sense of value is vulnerable to influence and temporality. The value of a garment to an individual changes for different occasions, over different time periods and in response to how the dress is experienced in terms of comfort, fit or application. This was seen in the questionnaire responses for this project<sup>24</sup>. The manifestation of value to the wearer is subjective and leads to difficulty in understanding the value one person may place on an item over another person’s measure of value for the same product. Little has been written about the transformation of clothes to fashion, although Loschek makes an attempt to explain it as an invention, a distillation of desire and a reflection of social negotiation (2009). In this sense, items of dress become part of an embodied experience, an idea that will be discussed further on. The decision to focus this study on the everyday means that the research is not related to the realm of high fashion, or haute couture, or to ceremonial or ritualistic vestments with religious or ethnic significance, except when these are part of the everyday activity of the research participants.

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<sup>23</sup> The communication model here follows source-sender-channel-message-receiver (“TFIA Council of Textile & Fashion Industries of Australia” 2015).

<sup>24</sup> See Appendix C

This next section highlights significant factors that were raised during the research. It focuses on particular aspects that the participant's felt influenced their clothing choices. It begins with a brief discussion on social identity, and looks at how clothing is used as a tool for inclusion in public or social situations. The topic of identity itself is vast, and could not be tackled fully in the scope of this project. However, an introduction to social identity reveals critical topics that inform the project, namely the postmodern idea of identity opt-in or opt out, as suggested by Zygmunt and Lydia Bauman (2013). That is followed by a discussion on the theatrics of presentation through performativity, an idea stemming from Erving Goffman (1971), and developed further by Judith Butler (1999) and others. This is included to frame four themes of influence that resonated with the participants from the study and how they chose their daily outfits. The literature discussed here directly informs the reflective analysis demonstrated in the visual diary and the creative works.

### Social Identity

History confirms that clothing has certainly been used over time to demonstrate tribal identification or family belonging. Religious beliefs have been, and still are, communicated through the practice of wearing certain items, such as the burka or veil worn by Muslim women, or crucifix jewellery worn by members of the Catholic Church. These particular items have symbolic reference and inherent meaning. It is also evident that in contemporary society, these items may be appropriated for the sake of their appearance or visual aesthetic and not for the traditional meaning. This raises some questions: is the purpose of dressing only identification? If one is not social or interactive, what is the meaning of dress? Does dress still have meaning if one is sitting alone with no one to see?

If we are to consider that public appearance or image is created for social consumption, then building an image requires a personal marketing strategy; a plan developed to create positive and successful social interactions. Corrigan (2008), among others, suggests dress and adornment represents more than age,

sex, race, and social status; it also gives clues about our intelligence, the role we play in society, our popularity, potential success and competence. This complexity of information lends itself to misinterpretation. Corrigan (2008) thinks of dress as both a “phenomenon” – a surface that lends itself to interpretation – and a “substance” – an object that something may happen to. This implies our relationship with dress has greater value, with higher stakes, when it is shared with an audience. As we venture out, doing chores, shopping or ferrying children to and from school we are advertising something about who we are. de Beauvoir (1989) goes even further and argues the social duty of a woman within the family is to “represent”, and notes that this will “become part of the pleasure she has in showing herself to others”. de Beauvoir goes on to explain the importance of dressing as a social duty. She says, “[f]irst, [a woman] has to represent herself; at home, going about her occupations, she merely dresses: to go out, to entertain, she dresses up” (1989). The implication here is that dressing up, or choosing outfits for social interaction, requires more effort, more time, and perhaps more consideration than merely putting on clothes.

Davis (1992) refers to social identity as “more than the symbols of social class or status”, extending this definition to include “any aspect of self about which individuals can through symbolic means communicate with others, in the instance of dress through predominantly non-discursive visual, tactile, and olfactory symbols”. In Davis’ opinion, the concept of social identity is about communication: “a configuration of attributes and attitudes persons seek to and actually do communicate about themselves” (1992). The extent to which we partake or are “involved” (1992, 16) in the use of these acts or behaviours to manipulate our image can vary widely even within an individual lifetime, and certainly appears an important way of engaging in image construction and management. Engagement with the fashion system through purchasing and self-presentation is never constant. Davis (Davis 1992, 16) points out that many of us have similar experiences, which he refers to “as the same conditions of life” calling this a “collective experience”. He suggests that it is to these “collective facets of our social identities that fashion addresses itself” (1992, 17). One person may follow fashion trends and be very involved in the “fashion scene”

while another may be “fashion ambivalent”, demonstrating a lesser engagement, yet the way both use fashion or dress to express their particular level of engagement is communicated through their choices of dress and adornment (Davis 1992, 16). He argues that identities are “rarely the stable amalgams we take them to be” and suggests that the multivalency of daily life carry over into the social arena through the symbolic meaning of dress choices, through which, he claims, fashion manages to “resonate exquisitely with the shifting, highly self-referential collective tensions and moods” (Davis 1992, 16). The messages of dress are a form of communication that sometimes work to gather like, or similar, groups, but can also alienate and separate individuals.

Deliberate and conscious choices, then, have a close and intertwined alliance with our social identity and may influence our experiences as we navigate the social world through creating perceptions and forming impressions in those with whom we interact. These choices, which can be seen as an expression of our individuality, have become complicated by the diversity and broad scope of the daily roles that women in contemporary society are expected to fulfil. One might consider this to be a postmodern problem brought about by changes to the roles women play in the twenty-first century; a woman’s involvement in work is more often outside the home, the women’s liberation movement increased financial freedom, and more leisure time has removed some of the boundaries which surrounded women’s choices of how women present their image. In earlier decades, according to Bauman, “identity did not become a problem; it was a ‘problem’ from its birth – was born as a problem (that is, as something one needs to do something about – as a task)...” Bauman (2013) describes the attainment of identity in modernity as being like a pilgrim’s journey, suggesting one starts life with a goal in mind of being ‘someone’ and that goal remains for all one’s life. He argues that the critical difference of postmodern identity is that it is the journey of a traveller rather than that of a pilgrim, a traveller who will have many destinations and various identities along the way (in Hall and Du Gay 1996). To Bauman, postmodern identity reflects the times. He suggests that in postmodernity the game of life is played in short sharp bursts: “beware long term commitments... refuse to be “fixed” one way, or the other ... [don’t] get tied

to the place...[don't] wed one's life to one vocation only... [don't] swear consistency and loyalty to anything or anybody" (in Hall and Du Gay 1996). As a result of this new attitude, Bauman says that "well-constructed identity turns from an asset to a liability" and goes on to say that the "hub of postmodern life strategy is not identity building, but avoidance of fixation" (in Hall and Du Gay 1996). If Bauman is correct, postmodern identity is characterized by a need to keep identity from settling by not letting it become known to others, keeping room for change and flexibility. In this sense, we can consider social identity to be a choice, something one can elect to partake in or choose to disengage from.

### **Performativity: The Theatrics of Image Management**

Sociologist Erving Goffman (1971) refers to identity as "performed" and that when we view this performance we are seeing the construction of self through a variety of tools. He calls these tools "setting" and "personal front" – which may be made up of appearance and manners – and suggests the interaction between these tools works to create impressions in viewers and moulds their opinions of how an individual is perceived (Goffman 1971). Through Goffman's (1971, 16) role theory, we are introduced to the concept of identity management. Goffman (1971) suggests that since people may have multiple roles to fulfil, they may have a variety of identities, constructed in part through appearance. These various roles are developed through social interaction, and as each role is performed and feedback received, the reflexive self embraces the performed role and continues to embellish it or deepen its character. Goffman's (1971) ideas lay the foundation for understanding identity as a performed representation of self, strengthening Craik's (2009) suggestion, discussed earlier, that to interpret identity we need cultural knowledge; in this case the perception of our identity is manifested in our constructed image (the actor's performance), but also in the cultural knowledge needed by both the viewer and audience in order to understand the messages projected. From Goffman's (1971) point of view, the message must be clearly sent and easily read. Performativity, or the act of constructing a daily appearance through participation in fashion, is an idea that is central to my investigation of women's clothing choices.

Judith Butler (1999) further develops the theory of performativity of identity in her exploration of gender construction. Butler argues that gender is neither natural nor inevitable, but is, instead, constructed through social discourse and institutions by performance. According to McQueen and McQueen (2010), Butler's ideas around performativity suggest that a person's gender is constantly re-created through performing in particular ways, complying to social norms and values. Simone de Beauvoir (1989) also suggests that we "become" a particular gender; she states, "one is not born, but rather, becomes, a woman"; here, de Beauvoir expresses her idea of gender neutrality; the belief that gender identity doesn't exist until it is formed through experience and then performed according to social expectations. In this study, portraying gender in the various roles performed by the participants was determined less by the women's choice of dress than by the audience to which they would be judged. Only dressing for the workplace appeared to present a dilemma, where being too overtly femininely dressed was a consideration.

Craik (2009) argues that identity in contemporary society is the result of cultural and historical contextual elements:

The combination of roles and performances compose our sense of self or individuality. In contemporary Western culture, the body is the locus or site of individual identity. We take the notion of the individual as a given – as natural and normal – but in fact individuality is a product of our historical moment and our dominant cultural mores.

Furthermore, Craik (2009) goes on to discuss the change in identity construction from modernity to postmodernity, saying, "whereas at other times and in other cultures, identity has been and is composed by family membership, regional belonging, class position, or gendered performances, in our culture we struggle to project a unique sense of self". Craik (2009, 138) adds, "[w]e now have greater freedom of choice to fashion our identity and our identity becomes a social entity in itself. Maintaining individuality requires constant maintenance

and fashioning". What Craik (2009) identifies here so brilliantly is a critical aspect of social identity. If we dress for others, and if we try to make meaning of others' identities by interpreting the clothing and dress choices they make, we need reference, we need to understand the 'language' they are using.

In this sense, social identity enlists both the wearer and the viewer in understanding the common language that is being used. How can one know when something is being used as a symbol of social status if one has not read or seen advertisements or know its price and origin? For fashion to communicate status, the viewer must know that the Gucci handbag, for example, is expensive, a luxury, is rare and highly valued in fashion circles. This type of information, which is often gained through cultural exchange, creates an item's value. Our education on clothing's social significance begins at a young age, and in contemporary society is very much a part of consumer culture. Marshall et al (2009) describe this as the socialization process, which embraces the "demographic and lifestyle aspects of a person that influences their involvement in fashion, and their consumer behaviours".

Featherstone (2007), however, suggests we are moving towards a "society without fixed status groups", and goes on to say, "[t]he adoptions of styles of life (manifest in choice of clothes, leisure activities, consumer goods, bodily dispositions) which are fixed to specific groups have been surpassed". If one is to believe Featherstone, then the use of dress to demonstrate social status is done, over, past! He notes that movement toward a postmodern consumer culture voids the social divisions which were once maintained by the use of fashion, suggesting the divisions are "no longer a significant reference point"(Featherstone 2007, 111). He does not, however, see this as a bad thing, instead saying that it "does not signify anything as dramatic as the implosion of the social space but should be regarded merely as a new move within it" (Featherstone 2007, 81). If the social space is changing, what changes does this bring about to the way we manage our appearance?

The ideas about social identity, belonging and individualism, and communication through dress discussed in this section apply directly to the production of the visual diary and the niches for this research project.



## The Role of Dress as Social Identification

Throughout the twentieth century, multiple fashion systems have been identified, each adding a deeper layer to the understanding of the role of clothing within society. These theories serve to help understand the present state of what is referred to as image management. This is similar to *impression management*, which Suzanne Marshall et. al.(2012) defines as “clothing cues used as a tool to influence the assignment of characteristics to the wearer”. As noted, preparation of a social self encompasses all aspects of appearance, not just clothing. Fashion systems have been used to articulate the role of clothing, dress and fashion throughout history. A system is a way of looking at something, and Craik (2009) (2009) states that a fashion system should consist of a number of elements, such as:

- Codified types of apparel
- Rules of wearing and combining garments
- Economic and symbolic exchange values
- Social meanings and statuses attached to apparel
- Codified modes of attaching identities to apparel.

The emergence of a commercial fashion system became obvious after the Industrial Revolution of the nineteenth century, when fashion and early mass-produced clothing became readily available for consumption by people from the emerging middle class. The nineteenth century was a period of great change, and fashion at that time was a “reflection of both technological advancement and shifting socio-cultural attitudes toward gender and class” (2009). The middle class used fashion to symbolize ideals of class and gender, and made a clear distinction between appropriate dress for men and women, something Mackenzie (2010) suggests remains true today. As clothes turned toward excess in fabric and embellishment in the period known in France as the Belle Époque (1895–1914), when high-priced fashions became a symbol of wealth for the aristocracy, the upper classes and the nouveau riche – those who had benefitted from the rise of consumerism as a result of the Industrial Revolution (Mackenzie 2010, 32).

This was the setting in which Thorstein Veblen wrote “The Theory of the Leisure Class”, published in 1899. According to Veblen (2007), fashion and clothing become an item of display, something worn out to be seen in and to be viewed as a measure of one’s wealth. Veblen identifies overly dressed women, decorated and adorned beyond the ability to work or perform meaningful tasks, strolling the avenues and shopping, as the “leisure class” (2007). The leisure class may include the “rich, the hyper-rich, the owning class, the ruling class, the upper class, the business class, the aristocracy, the nouveau riche and high society” (Mackenzie 2010, 67). Carter(2003) points out that Veblen’s interest is in the rivalry within this class. Veblen implies dress is a public display of consumption, full of nuances and subtle details that continually motivate change in fashion styles.

Veblen (2007) calls this a “pecuniary system”. Hence, a woman represents the wealth of her husband, or, as Barbara (2004, 45) points out, “she is the mobile property of her husband.” The fashion system defined by Veblen and described by Vinken (2004) is based on Marxist principles of the theory of class, and suggests change in style is perpetuated by competition amongst the wealthy that is generated by a display of self for other’s opinion. But dress does not belong to the wealthy alone.

Georg Simmel (1957) expanded Veblen’s analysis, identifying two opposing forces of fashion: conformity and individuality. According to his theory, the popularity of an item is generated by its popularity amongst the elite, and the subsequent trickle down effect into the masses. His is a world of emulation, where a few, often from the wealthy or aristocratic class, influence those of lower social standing. Simmel discusses the notion of duality, and provides understanding of the nature of dualism and how this generates imitation in fashion. Simmel writes, “Fashion is a form of imitation and so of social equalization, but, paradoxically, in changing incessantly it differentiates one time from another and one social stratum from another” (1957). Simmel (1957) goes on to explain how a polarity between the social classes is perpetuated by the use of certain fashions as a means of differentiation, that as fashion from the upper

classes is copied by the middle classes and then lower classes, the momentum for the upper class to change styles becomes a driving force behind the fashion cycle, thus continuing the separation between the social classes.

Simmel (1957) suggests that in addition to the element of imitation, the element of “demarcation” constitutes an important factor of fashion. He adopts an aesthetic perspective, drawing attention to the appearance of clothes themselves. He applies this to social, economic and racial class groups, and also discusses fashion change in terms of the political environment. Considering the time of major political upheaval in the period after World War I, he writes,

[c]hanges in fashion reflect the dullness of nervous impulses: the more nervous the age, the more rapidly its fashions change, simply because the desire for differentiation, one of the most important elements of all fashion, goes hand in hand with the weakening of nervous energy. This fact in itself is one of the reasons why the real seat of fashion is found among the upper classes (1957, 541).

The middle of the twentieth century saw dramatic shifts in the social life of consumers as the spread of industrialization and advances in technology brought changes to a wider socio-economic culture. Clothing styles were no longer associated simply with separating social classes; they became tools to identify one as *in* or *out* of current fashion. Blumer (1969) positions his theory centrally in aesthetics of dress, saying that a garment’s appearance makes it fashionable for a time, but only until the group moves away from that particular look. Blumer argues that fashion emerged from a desire to be “in fashion” (1969), and, as such, sees fashion as the choice of one style over another in order to be accepted by a particular social group. Craik (2009) suggests Blumer’s theory places fashion in the hands of the masses instead of the elite as a “visible reference to other changing dynamics of social life”. This symbolically begins the inevitable democratization of fashion we are familiar with today. The movement of fashion from being a phenomenon associated only with upper class people and special occasions to the style choices of everyday people in everyday situations

diminished the emphasis on messages of status, wealth and power. This shift allowed people to demonstrate individual style and create their own meaning from dress.

Cultural theorist and commentator, Roland Barthes first published "The Fashion System" in 1967, sharing with the world a linguist's point of view on how fashion is written about and promoted. Barthes (2006) suggests that fashion, as a language, is a product of commercialisation; in order to sell more clothes, manufacturers and publicists build a series of symbolic meanings into visual advertisements and editorials, and by doing so they create persuasive communication. Barthes (2006) describes clothing in a magazine in three ways: the first is "image-clothing", which he sees as visual or iconic representation through photography; the second is the "written clothing", which he sees as existing in a written form of descriptive journalism; and, thirdly, he identifies the "real garment", which he sees as a technological structure existing only in the process of manufacture. This structuralist idea of a fashion system, that there is no singular object because it is part of a larger system, led to a "paradigm change" (Barthes 2006) in the last quarter of the twentieth century. Barthes' (2006) application of structuralist theory to clothing meant that he examined garments as elements of an outfit, or a look, that were part of a vocabulary and a grammar of "viewing social phenomena as a set of interrelated components making up a complex whole".

Barthes' complex system of signifiers and signified comes from semiotics and is concerned with understanding signs about how things stand in relationship to other things, and how those mediated relationships help us to understand things better. Barthes (2006) is suggesting that fashion is a narrative and therefore a language, one through which fashion is constituted. However, Barthes wrote of his newly developed method of interpretation in a time when fashion began to demonstrate many of the characteristics of what has been named postmodernity, which, according to Mackenzie, is "fast-moving, heterogeneous, culturally non-specific, democratic and inter-textual blend of high and low culture" (2006). This break with modernity coincided with significant changes in the fashion industry

and the way dress and clothing was purchased, presented and positioned for sale. I will draw upon semiotics in a later discussion regarding the creative works and the creation of meaning within the creative context of codes, in this case, as Berger (2009, 98) describes, “a unique set of culture codes”.

The current fashion system, generally understood to reflect a “trickle up, trickle down, bubble up”(Marshall, Jackson and Stanley 2012) cycle of influence, presents women with a rather large obstacle. At any given time, our image is positioned in either an acceptable or unacceptable phase of the fashion cycle. This leads to a great sense of insecurity and poses an obstacle to happiness, self-acceptance, or even just getting on with day, as it is constructed through our choice of garments and accessories.

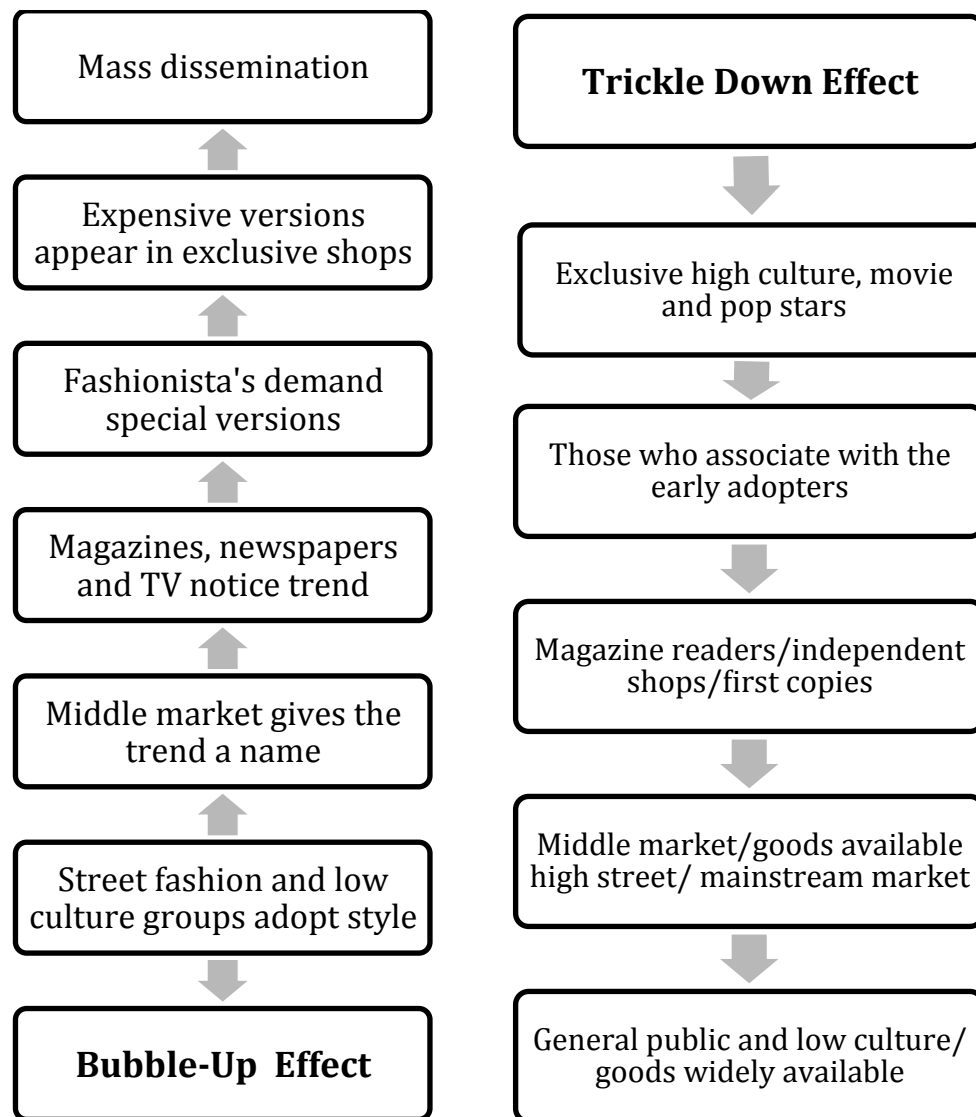


Figure 1: Bubble-Up Vs Trickle Down Models of Clothing Adoption- Developed from Marshall et al. (2012, 54) Fashion Adoption Theories

This diagram demonstrates these contrasting effects. The trickle down effect shows how clothing is distributed from high-level designer price points to the mass retail chains. In contrast to this, the bubble up effect model shows how a design is adopted from a subculture/ street fashion origin, and makes its way to the haute couture market. The effect of flux in the fashion cycle is further complicated by the fact that the same clothes take on different associations in different settings.

Today, the same garment can be, and is, worn in a wide range of social contexts, and individual items can be dressed up or down, acquiring many functions. This

implies that individual garments have many meanings and forms and serve various roles. An item may also be worn across class and subcultural groups. As contemporary societies move away from formal social restrictions and prescriptive and proscriptive fashion demands, clothing moves fluidly between occasions so that the purpose of an item is constantly being redefined; a corset becomes a top worn to a nightclub and jeans, once relegated to utility wear on the Californian gold fields, become office attire (Loschek 2009, 13).

Since the late twentieth century, the theories outlined above have been used to identify new systems within the field. Sometimes they are combined to reflect an emergent situation, such as when fashion is adopted by either trickle up or trickle down theories at the same time. According to Craik (Eicher, Evenson and Lutz 2008, 340), this multi-purpose approach is indicative of newer interdisciplinary approaches to fashion theory, which draw on a variety of approaches, and often centre on cultural theory. Craik (2009) categorizes these new themes of theory as follows:

- Historical approaches
- Consumer culture approaches
- Cultural forces
- Communicative relationships
- Gender-related and dependent practices.

This diversification appears to be driven by changes in contemporary society; shifting centres for fashion creation, changing fashion cycles, mass media and the internet, changing social class structures, changing technologies of manufacture and distribution, are all pushing the boundaries of traditional fashion systems.

Our ability to present our identity, an internal quality, into an external quality through dress is changing as a variety of contemporary influences affect how we see ourselves. Clothing has become the raw material manipulated to create individual appearance. As discussed earlier, traditional theories of fashion tend to deal with fashion as a commodity, something influenced by the wearer's sense of style and purpose for the item, necessary to be seen in order that the

wearer be considered fashionable in terms of current trends and standards. However, while the desire to be fashionable still holds sway today, the success of a garment as described by the women in this study suggests fashion-ability is not the dominant consideration.

The contemporary use of items of clothing in different ways in different contexts means that clothing once delegated as “special occasion” can easily become an everyday item, and in this we see the blurring of the lines between everyday and ritualistic or performative dress. Social occasions themselves are also changing rapidly. Meeting and interacting virtually via the internet, in on-line chat rooms and forums, and through the use of social media changes our ability to interpret symbolic messages about identity. In the virtual world, identity can be falsified, enhanced or embellished.

The next section looks at four key areas of influence on contemporary women’s clothing choice.



## Influences on Contemporary Women's Clothing Choices

To begin to answer the question of how women choose dress, it is important to consider what influences those choices around appearance concern. Four key themes emerged from the analysis of the research that appear to strongly influence the way the participants in the study managed their appearance. These themes are the new role of dress, body image, celebrity mimicry, and the concept of personal branding. According to Malcolm Barnard:

... we make decisions about the social status and the role of the people we meet based on what they are wearing: we treat their clothes as 'social hieroglyphics', to use Marx's term which conceal, even as they communicate, the social position of the wearer. Fashion and clothing that is, may be the most significant ways in which social relations between people are constructed, experienced and understood (2002).

These themes are defined and expanded in the next section, providing a thematic scaffold from which the creative works take form.

## Theme 1: The emotional power of clothing

In my practice, I often hear about items of clothing to which the owner has a fond attachment. Some of these items have been described as “my lucky dress” or “my happy pants”; other women describe being dressed in their wedding dress as having felt “like a princess”. These items are associated with positive feelings. At other times, however, I hear the antithesis: “my ugly dress”, “fat skirt”, “ashamed of how I look in that top”, “embarrassed by those jeans”. They are terms used by women when describing how closely linked emotional wellbeing is with their identity and image. Anna Moran and Sorchá O’Brien (2014) suggest that objects can have an “emotional potency” and that they can become objects and representations, which they describe as “active participants in and mediators of our relationship with others”. This relationship of objects to emotions and representation is known as material culture. I discussed material culture in the methodology section, however I reintroduce it here to help explain how it applies to the project in terms of the role clothes play in our relationship with the external world.

Material culture provides a lens for us to understand the relationship between clothes design and our emotions through an embodied experience. As Moran (2014) explains, it is a way for designers to understand how emotions are developed and how it can be used to “create affective, sustainable relationships with those objects”. French couturier, Jean Paul Gaultier, created a collection which he named “you feel as though you have eaten too much...”. It was a homage to the mistakes or embarrassments caused by clothes (2014). Wilson (Moran and O’Brien 2014, xiv) suggests that it is as if they have a “life of their own”. Perhaps this sense of agency explains the difficulty a widow finds when packing up the clothes of her deceased husband, or why a heartbroken lover clings to the tee-shirt that smells like her ex-boyfriend; clothes become a means for us to capture the identity and image of a person. Craik argues:

Very often, we think of the clothed body as a natural form, only dressed up for a specific occasion. However the body – although composed of

natural parts – is never natural, but is produced by how it is clothed (2003).

What we see in dressing is an attempt to present our identity, to express an internal quality as an external quality or image, and it is the process of this exemplification that is the focus of this study.

## Theme 2: Clothing and its effect on body image

Personal social identity is demonstrated through a mix of body use and clothing. While performativity as a means to express social identity has been discussed, one particular aspect of critical importance of the role the body plays in image management is one's sense of how we look, or how others might see us. Body image is defined by Roberta Honigman and David Castle(2007) as the picture of the size, shape and form of our bodies that we see in our mind's eye. It can be interpreted positively, as sexually desirable or socially acceptable, or it can be seen negatively, as in body dysmorphic disorder, where the person believes the body part is greatly distorted. According to Honigman (2007), body image can influence our behaviour, self-esteem and psyche. While clothing is the element that packages the identity, one's sense of body image determines the way a person moves, feels and behaves in those clothes. Since the mid-1980s Western society has placed increased emphasis on physical appearance, with beauty now being considered a significant indicator of other personal attributes.

Studies undertaken by social psychologists have revealed that attractive people are viewed more positively than other individuals, and receive preferential treatment in all aspects of their daily lives, and, not surprisingly, this was seen to be associated with a more positive self-image and better mental health (Honigman and Castle 2007). In the mid-1990s, human interest shows such as *How to Look Good Naked*, *What Not to Wear* and *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* publicized body image by reaching in to the living rooms of millions of consumers worldwide with tips, ideas and regimes for changing the way you

look; self help books aimed to encourage people to 'change' or 'makeover' their image with the help of a personal stylist or cosmetic surgeon, to 'look younger and feel better'. Over the past few decades, popular book titles like *Dress for Success* by Malloy (1975), *Glamour* by Coffey (1979) and *Flatter your Figure* by Larkey (1992), all cited by Honigman and Castle (2007) have dealt with personal style.

The television shows and literature of this time made consumers more tolerant of the notion of changing or manipulating what they were born with, presenting image as something that could be plied into conformity or packaged to suit a new perception of ideal beauty. Those individuals who have an innate sensitivity about their appearance are particularly likely to be influenced negatively by media messages showing 'ideal' images (Honigman and Castle 2007). Many seek the surgeon's knife to resolve body image concerns. Working from the top down, a surgical menu of what is on offer gives us hair transplants for male-pattern balding; eyelid surgery for a wider, more youthful gaze; nose, ear and chin reshaping; implants to fill out hollow cheeks; face and neck lifts; breast enlargements, reductions (both male and female) and uplifts; nipple correction for a perkier appearance; arm lifts to tighten saggy skin; tummy tucks, with liposuction for recalcitrant fat; buttock lifts to pull in drooping flesh and implants to push it out; vaginal tightening, labial reduction and inserts for a shapelier calf, to list some of the more common procedures used to enhance our body image (in Eicher, Evenson and Lutz 2008, 78).

### **Theme 3: How others perceive us through our choice of clothes**

As Jackson and Shaw (2006) point out, almost every picture, fashion story, still life shoot, product, person and celebrity we see in publications is styled. This means that images are carefully created to suit a need; most often, to communicate a cultural message about ideal beauty, image or fashion. Of course, what is considered ideal is pliable, changing over time, only to be replaced by a new ideal. In contemporary society, celebrities often embody the current ideal.

Arguably, we have an interest in showing, by means of our dress, that we conform to the expectations of those we affiliate with, and we may also, as Eicher suggests, desire to express our individuality through dress (Honigman and Castle 2007). This issue of conformity and individuality is important in understanding how we build our image using objects to communicate our beliefs. In terms of my research, the process of negotiating conformity and individuality is most interesting when it leads to our sense of self-image becoming distorted by mimicry and unnatural idolatry, as in the case of celebrity worship, creating a sense of diminished self-worth and low self-esteem.

In all societies, some forms of appearance are singled out as more desirable than others. As consensus develops, based on the values of members in the society, cultural ideals for pleasing others evolve. A cultural ideal is a kind of shorthand summary of aesthetic values. Because an ideal represents a set of values, it can also be seen as a goal, though it is often an unstated one. Such goals are epitomized in art, and often appear unobtainable (Vincent 2009, 167). As such, a feeling of dissatisfaction and disillusionment pervades the women in the study, and a sense of self-imposed judgement that they are not ideal enough.

A curious relationship exists, however, in the fantasy, or dress-up component of celebrity life. We see celebrities partake in the performative aspects of dress through video, dance, music, awards, and in doing so, perhaps we recognize that part of ourselves that dresses to “perform” (Eicher, Evenson and Lutz 2008, 285). Clothes identify the role we are playing, signal to others who we are, our beliefs or values. As Wilson suggests, fashionable clothing has become central to mass culture, in the widest sense, as a means whereby individuals express themselves and construct identities (Eicher, Evenson and Lutz 2008, 340). The ease with which contemporary culture adopts and mimics celebrity demonstrates our ability to sometimes disguise, mask, hide or deny our own identity and move into the package of someone else. As the social culture is engulfed in mass media, the individual is absorbed.

#### Theme 4: How we use clothes to project parts of our identity.

The field of image consulting and personal branding is planted firmly in the developed world, and gained momentum in Western societies in the 1980s. It is commensally connected with clothing, dress and fashion. Personal branding is a term coined by business writer and consultant Tom Peters in 1997. Peters proposed that people are brands just like any other product or service (Wilson and Entwistle 2001). Personal branding is a natural extension of image and wardrobe consultancy, where a client's style and appearance is scrutinized, evaluated and analysed. The consultant gives advice on how to improve image with suitable, flattering clothing using the right silhouettes, details, fabrics and colours. Personal branding became linked to reputation building, personal public relations, marketing and networking (Butler 1999). It has now become an important tool for recruiting and human resource management. The practice relates to both personal appearance and public image, and is linked to presenting identity as marketability. Personal branding is embedded in consumerism and public consumption (2003, 1).

A major area of growth in image consulting and personal branding is digital identity management, which involves placing the client in the public eye via the internet, using similar strategies to those used in product brand development, a practice that is growing and is known as virtual identity management. Image advisors in a virtual field work not in the field of production and manufacturing a product but in the intangible field of perceived and projected self-image. The image consultant works to market a client's image for public consumption, to gain or upgrade employment, or to influence opinion, or for personal reasons such as creating an on-line dating profile. The digital identity management practitioner manipulates the client's identity in the virtual world, but the personal element is removed in the process, since another person undertakes construction of identity. It is common to create websites that promote a personal identity; Facebook and Instagram are strong examples. However, in the near future, large amounts of identity information will be readily available through specific search engines and websites. Out of the need to protect, promote and

disguise an on-line identity, clients are requesting identity grooming and other services that manage public image. The growth in the field of personal branding has triggered everyday men and women to consider their image and to interrogate their identity.

These are just some of the possible influences on women's clothing choice. The scope of this project does not allow for a broad survey. In the next section, the key discoveries from the data collection are discussed, which will show why particular issues were considered.

## Key Discoveries

This section provides analysis of the data and identifies common themes that emerged from the data collection. These discoveries suggest that there are possibly many conflicting forces at play in the determination of how women manage public image and appearance<sup>25</sup>.

First, however, here is some information about the participants who completed the interview questions. The details of the blog respondents were unreliable. Instead, I asked for followers from there if they would like to self-nominate for inclusion in a questionnaire where they would have to provide some identifying information about themselves. Through this process of self-nomination, ten participants became the focus of the study. The ranges of ages, income, marital status and citizenship are coincidental, determined by those who chose to participate. The participants provided the following data about themselves.

	Age	Income	Marital Status	Australian
1.	18-30	-AU\$20,000	Single	Yes
2.	18-30	-AU\$20,00	Single	Yes
3.	18-30	AU\$20,000-40,000	Single	Yes
4.	30-39	AU\$ 40-80,000	In a relationship	Yes
5.	30-39	AU\$80- 120,000	In a relationship	Yes
6.	40-49	AU\$ 40-80,000	In a relationship	Yes
7.	40-49	AU\$80-120,000	In a relationship	Yes
8.	50-59	AU\$ 40-80,000	Single	Yes
9.	50-59	AU\$ 40-80,000	In a relationship	Yes
10.	50-59	-AU\$20,000	Single	Yes

Figure 2: Interview Participant's Profiles.

Central to constructing a public appearance is the relationship the respondents engaged in with the clothing itself. In this sense, clothing as material culture is central to the findings. Clothing evokes emotions and prompts memories,

<sup>25</sup> Full responses are included in Appendix A and Appendix B



encapsulating either the experience of wearing the item or the event to which it was worn, as such becoming a representation of the success or failure of the items itself. There are two other factors contributing to the relationship. Firstly, there is how one addresses one's sense of how one wants to be seen, or personal branding; and, secondly, how one creates that image through image management.

Of the relationship to clothes, participants used terms such as "sartorial journey", "false perception", "evocative" and "let down". Such terms indicate that in specific instances the role of clothing was far more complex than pure protection or modesty. Instead, clothing became a partner or conspirator in the event or activity in which the wearer was participating. It is evident that there is an expectation that their clothing choice will improve the experience in some way, yet their comments disprove this. One participant described her choice as "wrongness", implying that her choice had failed to provide the performance she had expected. Further links to emotional disappointment arose in comments like "let down" and uncomfortable" and even extended to where one woman wrote that she evaded the mirror and all sense of her "reflection". Notions of self-esteem and ideal image further complicate the power of this highly charged emotional relationship.

The management of image, like all things we hope to control, is vulnerable to failure, however. There appears to be an expectation that clothing will enhance social inclusion. Yet, for some of the respondents, failure of their clothing to secure this left them feeling "ostracised", "left out", "an outsider". Others described using clothes as "protection", in the way a mask might hide who they really are. From this arises a tension between the expectations of the clothing and the ensuing performance. This is intensified by the more important the event or occasion at which the garment is worn, as noted by the participants. The gym, exercise or activity has low stakes; there is not a great deal of value placed on clothing worn to the gym, but higher stake events such as a guest at a wedding, or a workplace presentation, puts clothing choice under vigorous

scrutiny. Here, terms such as “confidence/reward” and “transformation” were offered.

Social status, usually one aspect of identity that is clearly denoted by clothing, was identified as important for providing the ability to fit in. While brand recognition was raised by several of the respondents, it was used as a term to flag that the wearer was part of a “particular group”. This did not always mean highly priced branded fashion, but clothing that in some instances didn’t belie one’s financial status, hence allowing one to fit in with various socio-economic groups at any one time. Reference to highly popular multinational labels tended to fit the criteria for forming a neutral uniform. Some of these labels were seen to be beyond financial signifiers, instead showing global awareness of popular culture items like active sports brands or jeans showed the wearer was a member of a particular lifestyle choice. Social inclusion was considered highly valued in the success of dressing. Fear of “mis-communication” and the intentional use of clothing to provide “protection” formed a clear theme in the responses.

Body image and its influences on self-esteem was strongly linked with clothing. A question about having a fashion “muse” raised interesting responses. A muse was seen as a woman with “a true fit with self-image”, meaning that when a woman appeared authentic, she was most likely to be emulated. Others considered this role of muse as a bad thing; “be you”, “muse, not idolisation” were two anti-muse responses.

## The Niches: The Condition of my Appearance

As mentioned in chapter one, the term niche is borrowed from architecture; that is, a “small hollow or recess in a wall or other solid architecture element”(Stokstad, Grayson and Addiss 1995) . Niches are often seen in churches or formal architectural structures and hold objects such as statues or sculptures, or even tombs. I first experienced niches as freestanding objects when I travelled to Oaxaca in Mexico in 1990. Mexico has a strong culture of folk art, art made by “common people” (Stokstad, Grayson and Addiss 1995, 725). Here, small wooden, metal or papier-mâché boxes were filled with items as memory boxes for family or friends who had died. These boxes in Spanish are called *nichos*. Small objects owned or cherished by the deceased, such as photographs, toys, baby shoes or a lock of hair, that serve as memento mori, would be lovingly grouped together in these artistic housings and placed on home altars in preparation for El Dia de los Muertos, the Day of the Dead, or El Dia de los Angelitos, the Day of Little Angels (see figure 5). During the celebrations, these niches are carried to the graveside to adorn the graveyard throughout feasting and dancing. The niches are an extension of the community church, where niches house statues of saints and religious icons. In their smaller and more mobile form, the niches are a way to transport precious items of respect between the family home and the grave site. It is this practice that I allude to in naming the artefacts niches.

The nichos of Mexico serve as objects of contemplation and reflection. In this project, the niches become metaphors for the ideas and issues raised through the research. They are not intended to be sophisticated or highly developed artistic objects, instead they draw together key signifiers that hint at, or suggest, the research findings. Mexican folk art is often anonymous, remaining unsigned in most cases, and is generally made by both genders. Eli Bartra (2011, 12) suggests that there are three characteristics commonly shared in Mexican folk art: ingenuousness, freshness and innocence. Bartra states, “[f]or this reason it is also often referred to as naïve art” (2011, 15). Originally, folk art was produced by c people to represent something magical or religious (2011, 15). The

examples of niches from Mexico shown below are naïve and simply constructed. The niches take their inspiration from such folk art. While each niche is discussed in more detail in this section, it is helpful to think of these creative works as the practitioner–researcher’s response to the women’s experience of wearing clothes, or their views on items from their wardrobe.





Figure 3: Personal Collection of Metal, Wood and Papier-Mâché Niches from Mexico 1990 trip

The contents of the niches serve as signs. Umberto Eco (1981) suggests that “A sign is everything which can be taken as significantly substituting for something else”. In this sense, observing the niches prompts the viewer to search for meaning through private reflection or external discussion. As an example of this, there were several criteria I aimed to make evident in the pieces in order to provide unity. They build on the idea of a unique cultural code to signpost meaning.<sup>26</sup> Eco suggests a sign-function is created when “an expression is correlated to a content, both the correlated elements being the functives of such a correlation” (1976, 7). Through sign-function, many layers of meaning can be implied and insinuated without blatantly relying on a common understanding of context or experience when viewing the niches.<sup>27</sup> Viewing the niches can still be meaningful without the need to partner with a parallel textual description.

The niches are three-dimensional manifestations of the conditions examined in the visual diary, and interweave with the themes presented there. To create some coherence and commonality, I established some criteria to steer the creative process. There were five main concepts I adhered to. The first was,

<sup>26</sup> In the visual diary, *Notes To Self About Design And Diversity*, a unique cultural code was developed using rubber stamps to indicate if the image warranted a response to hand, heart, head or body. (See appendix C)

<sup>27</sup> Further discussion on signs and signals follows as the individual niches are described.

where possible, I only used found or recycled items that had been discarded and found ways to re-purpose them. This makes reference to the bricoleur <sup>28</sup> approach to reflective practice, stitching together pieces from various locations to create a new item. This serves to contrast the materials and the meaning from a highly polished craft or art form. The approach also mimics folk art's typically utilitarian and functional character, using objects found in the home (Bartra 2011). The effect of using everyday items draws attention to the location of the fictional armoire, or wardrobe, as being in the home, which is most often the place of daily dressing. There is a subtle link here between the process of dressing, in taking various components and restyling pieces together in different ways each day. Barry Sandywell (2011, 18) suggests that bricolage is an "open, aleatory, practicable, ever adoptable cosmology of practical make-do's, found objects, available fragments, bits and pieces, detritus." This invites the work to be observed as both an image and a metaphor for the textual aspects of the research findings. As Sandywell (2011, 178-9) states, "In this sense it is both an image of textually and metaphoric processes"

Secondly, I considered tactility. Leather, velvet, wood, plastic and metal are materials all of us have either touched or worn in some form, and this creates a sense of familiarity. I used these materials in the external surfaces of the niches to suggest a sensory experience the viewer may have had, playing with the associations these materials have in material culture. Tactility is an enormous influencer in clothing choice. Often, touching a fabric or imagining it's feeling creates a strong motivation to purchase, or to aspire to purchase, a garment. The recognition and familiarity of the surface textures also alludes to the design element of 'texture', which is often considered in the design development process.

Thirdly, I included in each niche a visual reference to practice through representation of objects in a design studio or to the craft of making clothes. In this sense, these metaphorically suggest the tools of the handcraft of clothing

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<sup>28</sup> A bricoleur is described by Sandwell as "A 'tinkerer', a jack of all trades, odd job person or one who 'makes do' by creatively using, appropriating, or re-cycling existing materials, scraps, tools or other means of production. The use of briolage is the paradigm exponent of the DIY culture" (Eco 1981)



construction and imply the act of making. These symbolic items also serve to locate the reflection in and around the place of practice as the home, as they are domestic tools, not industrial. In this sense, it reminds the viewer that one can construct the image that one might conjure up each day.

The fourth steering criterion was the use of mirrors in the niches. Mirrors were used to promote reflection, both physically and conceptually. In this way, I reference Bolton's idea of reflective practice as "through the looking glass".

The final criterion involved the viewer, who must manually open or perceive to open the niches. This served to engage them through participation in, and interaction with, the object. It also suggests that we are looking inside something, or 'opening up' and in this sense paying homage to the internal discussion and debate the women undertook when dressing.

The development of the niches was iterative; they evolved in response to the participants' comments and my own learning from the literature review. The final results were intended to be speculative rather than to prove a point. I explored the notional consequences of the discoveries from research and made abstract associations in order to cobble together imagery from the visual diary. The outcomes were open, I had no particular plan in mind, but instead placed the objects in various combinations before determining which items partnered best with which exterior niche. This process follows what Haseman describes in his description of practice-led research as research led by the "enthusiasm of practice"; it is "individualistic and idiosyncratic" (2011, 179). Here, the output of the research was expressed in terms other than language, they were intended to be experienced (2006, 100). This experience with the objects created an action; in this sense it was "performative research" (Haseman 2006). This is true for the researcher and the viewer of the niches as they discover the meaning of their content. In viewing the niches, attention should be paid to the symbolic idiosyncrasies to help make meaning as "each symbol functions as a means to conceptualise ideas about the aspects of reality, and also a means of communicating what is known to others" (Haseman 2006, 103).

## We are not the same...



Figure 4: We are not the same...

This niche includes one of the items a particular participant named in her account of choosing her daily dress. It materialises the notion that even if you hold high educational qualifications or are on a corporate board, you still feel the need to manipulate your appearance in anticipation of the reception of others. Here, the use of plastic dinosaurs acts as a challenge to traditional corporate male gendered suits.

Each respondent to the blog clearly articulated something about her own strategy for dressing. The response below is the example that informed this niche:

Q. Can you describe any ways in which you might manipulate your image to please others?



A. I am more likely to wear plastic dinosaurs in my hair to a board meeting that tone things down to please someone! Which is essentially the same behaviour, only on the other side of the coin. More of a brash statement of "this is me, deal with it" than a conciliatory "please be nice, I am trying to fit in". Both behaviours are designed to elicit a change in others... whether it is favourable or designed to make people sit up and pay attention. What I would NOT do is wear an outfit which portrays an untruth image of who I am, e.g. I would not suddenly start wearing baggy jeans and a backwards baseball cap, even if it would be to my benefit... To me that would be assuming a false persona, portraying myself as someone I am not, and ultimately lying to both myself and those around me. Who knew clothes could make such powerful statements!

Whilst this action is not described in terms of effect on those at that particular meeting, this imagined act of defiance created a great sense of satisfaction for the participant. Here was her way of remaining individual and to not be seen as conforming to a vestimentary code<sup>29</sup>. Importantly for the woman in this case, using the hair clip appears to be her expression of a sense of individuality, showing who she is. While it could be judged that this does nothing to enhance her position as a woman within the corporate world, her choice to use a childish hair clip somewhat empowers her.

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<sup>29</sup> The term vestimentary code is used to imply an externally derived and policed set of rules about the particular items worn, similar to Sumptuary Laws that have been used throughout history to limit the wearing of certain items or the material used in particular garments.

In this time...



Figure 5: in this time...

The clock is an obvious reference to time, but it was, in fact, the shape and form of the box that I most admired. I was attracted by the fact that the clock's mechanism is on the door and that the interior of the clock is empty, making a large unused space. In this niche I wanted to imply that the façade, our appearance, sometimes has a purpose to fulfil, while inside, our thoughts, our real self, is kept hidden. I think of this in terms of aging; comments such as "beauty is only skin deep" are used to console us for the loss of self-esteem around appearance as we age. Women who disengage from the fashion system as they age are also stepping away from that façade building process.

Symbolically the items within this niche are very personal. Inside, I have used a photograph of myself as a flower child in a dress that I felt so pretty in, and pieces from the designer's studio to remind myself that I have always wanted to

make clothes, too, so other women could feel the wonderful feeling I had that day. This dress was the reason I became a clothing designer, a career I always knew I would pursue. Now, thirty years later, I reflect on my role and think about what my relationship with clothes is today, and how I have influenced the dress choices of other women. The project has allowed me to reflect “on practice” (Haseman 2006, 103) and review my contribution to the practice. In my research for this project, one participant responded, when asked if media influenced her opinion of self-image:

I remember watching Trinny and Susannah being horrible to lots of defenceless women on *What not to wear* in the UK, and thinking, “but they aren’t trying to figure out who the women are, they just want to turn them into carbon copies of T & S”. I have never been impressed with the fashion makeover shows for exactly that reason. I do think it must be quite difficult thing to help someone dress so that they feel like themselves and at the same time portray whatever it is they want to portray.

What she skilfully articulates is the thing I suggest is missing from the fashion system for some women: their ability to address their appearance in terms of their own criteria.

How these ideas of self-image form cannot be pinpointed, but the continual use of certain criteria continues into middle age and beyond. Another participant described when her outfit feels “right” to her. She said:

Now, at 58, an outfit feels right if it enhances the way I look and feel. That means tailored simple lines and natural fabrics – silk, cotton, linen, and wool. I don’t want to be ‘mutton dressed as lamb’ but I don’t want to look like a frumpy senior citizen either!

While it is important that the outfit suits her body, it is as important that she not be judged as dressing for a younger age, and here I refer to the age ordering discussed in the visual diary section “in this time...” Female folklore around what

is suitable for one's age is not formalised in education programs; instead, ideas around what is considered age appropriate are handed down from mother to daughter, and from sisters and friends. Another participant wrote about her weight: "I was slim when I was younger, now I'm fat, that's life, I could do something about it but I like my wine too much." With age, comes different self-image criteria and these women were navigating without a manual.

In this body...



Figure 6: in this body...

I use the metaphor of sardines in a can to express a desire to be accepted and not judged by other women; judged for body size, or hair colour, or if one's body has born a child and has stretch marks. Successful social inclusion appears to be the strongest motivation for the women in the studies. Whilst comments that imply concern over weight or skin colour, etc., matter to some women, their own opinion of how their body appears to be paramount. For one woman in the study her slim, fit body was a concern. When asked, "Have you had an experience where you have felt strongly influenced by other people's opinion of your image?" she replied:

YES, won't dress tight, or low cut or short skirted near people who constantly say to me 'you are so skinny'. One of these days I will get the courage to reply, you are so fat!

In contrast, another participant wrote of her weight:

I don't think weight loss shows influence my self-image particularly – but I'm very aware of the imperative to be slim from absolutely everywhere in the media. I'm sad to say that I buy into it. I have a secret and unassailable belief that everything would be better if I could just manage to lose 6 kgs.

When the same woman was asked to what extent she would be prepared to change her physical appearance in order to match it to her view of herself, she replied, "I'm trying like a crazy thing to lose that 6 kgs. Again." These two women, although presenting with contrasting body weight issues, were still bound by the same set of social judgements and critique. Another participant looked at clothes as a way of being included in various social events. She wrote,

I can't ski to save myself, but I had to look the part when invited to Big Bear in California with a bunch of seasoned skiers. In fact, if I'm honest, I think this is one of my character traits – a need to look the part. If, for example, I took up running, I would have to consider the outfit carefully

and buy serious appropriate shoes. Maybe I use clothes to help me fit in.  
Maybe that's why I had my nose pierced in India. Spooky!

These examples show how relationships with clothing help women to negotiate through various social situations, giving them camouflage and the confidence to fit in. Along with managing perceptions of body image and judgement, dress is a material object that can be both harnessed and manipulated.



## Conclusion

This project was initiated with the aim of elucidating choices women make around their clothing and appearance in everyday social interaction. The question, 'tell me how you choose your outfit' enabled the researcher to consider a range of triggers in the decision-making process, and provided rich unprocessed data that the creative works respond to. Within a practice-led framework, drawing critically and reflectively on my practice as a fashion designer, and filtered through a material culture theoretical lens, the project saw the identification and establishment of a set of 'conditions' that influenced the women in the study. These conditions, which are titled, *we are not the same, in this place, in this time, in this body* and *in this dysphoria*, are captured, explored and re-presented in the reflective journal used here as a visual diary. These conditions and the elements in their make-up that are tied to the creative process are brought together in the production of a collection of three niches. These physical manifestations serve as conceptual metaphors inspired by the nominated conditions: *we are not the same, in this time*, and *in this body*.

In a similar way, this exegetical framework, which informs, and is informed by, the creative practice, the creative outputs themselves, the reflective journal and the niches, work together to capture a holistic representation of the story of the issues that women face in their clothing choice. It is hoped that this physical production of an emotive set of concerns captures, builds on and is able to offer insight into potential resolutions to the issues explored through the research.

This study illustrates a rigorous practice-led research approach to considerations in fashion design, and positions the approach as a valuable methodology in how the considerations can inform the creative process. Engaging with reflective practice theory has enabled the transformation of tacit knowledge of the women in the study, and the practitioner, to capture qualitative data that may have otherwise remained unseen. In this sense, the combination of the three theories used in this project –, practice-led research, reflective practice



and material culture – has combined very effectively to guide the process of elucidation of the research problem and address the research question. As to applications of the research to the field of fashion design, there is clearly potential to consider the integration of formal reflection phases into the fast-paced design process from the initial stage. The practitioner, engaged in deliberate and meaningful reflection throughout the design process, alongside the principles and elements of design in their practice, can realise richer opportunities to satisfy what can be specific and very particular needs of clients. The exegesis, and the creative work are evidence of an important shift in the way I view the relationship between my practice and the theories explored.

It is clear that there are opportunities for further research that can build on this small and quite limited project. As to applications of the research to the field of fashion design, there is clearly potential to consider its integration into fashion design education of formal reflection phases in to the design process from the initial stages of development, in particular, developing educational resources and tools for education in clothing design that enhance and strengthen traditional design development cycles through inclusion of formalised reflective practice. While the speed of product development in industry is hasty, the benefits of a structured reflection model for fashion designers could be easily adopted if integrated into the early education of the practitioner engaged in study in art and design programmes. In this way, if the practitioner would be engaged in deliberate and meaningful reflection throughout the design process, just as they engage the principles and elements of design in their practice, leading to more opportunities to satisfy particular needs of clients.

## Appendix A: Digital Questionnaire Sample Response

First Impressions Post “Myfrockrocks”

Monday, 16 July 2012

Through the eyes of others!

The posting on first impressions has had a lovely response. Thank you!

These questions are about how people respond to your appearance or your perceived identity.

- 1) Do you think people misunderstand the messages clothing or body adornment may give? Can you give an example of when this may have happened to you?
- 2) Do you have any examples of when you thought you were sending message "A" such as “career focused” for example, and it was perceived by someone else as message "B", conservative and uptight?
- 3) How highly do you value the opinions of others in regard to the way you dress?
- 4) Can you describe any ways in which you might manipulate your image to please others?
- 5) What is your opinion of others who do this?

By responding through the comment box, you are confirming your responses may be used as part of a research project. Your name will not be used.

Posted by [debf](#) at [2:55 PM](#) 

[Email This](#)[BlogThis!](#)[Share to Twitter](#)[Share to Facebook](#)

### ***10 comments:***

1.



***May***[17 July 2012 1:02 AM](#)

- 1) Absolutely, the messages are open to interpretation.
- 2) Interpretation is affected just as much by the viewer's perceptions e.g. I was visiting someone at a group activity for disadvantaged folk in West End after attending a work meeting in the city. I was creatively and certainly not expensively dressed but the outfit did look classic with a twist. The impression I gave the West End group was coloured by their resistance to the gentrification of their neighbourhood and their social position in that. The outfit looked expensive. I think it was more than just the same message not being received well. I think a different message was received.
- 3) I am a bit anti-image. I don't like ticking boxes and being completely fashionable. I love beautiful things so sometimes my style appeals to others but often I do not follow trends and fail to get approval from those who care more than I about what's fashionable.
- 4) I don't manipulate my image. I dress depending on how I feel.
- 5) I admire much more people who dress with individual flair than those who are following trends.

[Reply](#)



2.

[debfi7 July 2012 1:46 AM](#)

Ah! I love the term anti-image...I picture an eclectic mix of design styles, a sort of come-hither-what may, but still the envy of those around you because you look so uniquely you! Can you tell what it means to you?

It is said by fashion theorists that dressing in post-modernity is pastiche (insert smiley face here), taking various styles and combining them from a variety of ethnic sources and from many price points. The purpose of this style being to show our individuality and to not attach us to some type of social norm, like "middle class" or a subculture, like "goth". Any thoughts?

[Reply](#)

[Replies](#)



1.

[May19 July 2012 8:44 AM](#)

I don't always pull off "the envy of those around me" :) but dressing is more an expression of how I feel. Sometimes that's really great but can

also be quite ordinary. Dressing to show you belong to a subculture is a bit like wearing a uniform? Maybe my conservative clothes are the uniform I retreat to. Much better the bold days when I wear pieces I love!

[Reply](#)

3.



**Anonymous** [17 July 2012 5:38 AM](#)

1) Do you think people misunderstand the messages clothing or body adornment may give? Can you give an example of when this may have happened to you?

They way I dress has always revolved around how I want to be perceived by others. I used to dress outlandishly because I wanted people to be drawn to me because of my clothes and I wanted to be noticed for my clothes. This was when I was skinny. I now refuse to wear anything that might make people think I am anything less than super fit because I want to be noticed for my physique. If I dress too fashionably I fear people will see me as a fashionable person and not see my physique. Sometimes I will wear something a little out there like crazy sneakers or a crazy jacket and I am scared someone will see me and not recognize that I usually look different. Someone, a stranger, who I would otherwise love to impress. I don't think I worry people will misunderstand the message my clothing gives but I'm aware certain clothing sends certain messages. I would probably be concerned about people misunderstanding the message my clothing says if I wasn't so confident I knew the exact image I was portraying with any outfit.

2) Do you have any examples of when you thought you were sending message "A" such as "career focused" for example, and it was perceived by someone else as message "B", conservative and uptight?

Sometimes I am concerned when getting dressed that I might be too literal. Eg/ sneakers, basketball jersey and gym shorts might look like I am actually going to play basketball instead of dressing casually in a basketball jersey. I sort this out before leaving the house though.

3) How highly do you value the opinions of others in regard to the way you dress?

As I said in question 1) I am very conscious of how I am perceived and how people see me and my physique with the way I dress. I don't value the opinions on my

style of dress or particular garments instead of value how I am perceived by others for what I wear or don't wear.

4) Can you describe any ways in which you might manipulate your image to please others?

As a gay male I definitely dress very masculine and normal in order to appeal to a certain type of person. More to the point appear to what I think a certain person would be attracted to.

5) What is your opinion of others who do this?

I think most people do this. It is how inconspicuously they do it that determines whether they look like/are perceived to be a total wanker.

[Reply](#)



4.

**Anonymous** [17 July 2012 8:45 AM](#)

3) How highly do you value the opinions of others in regard to the way you dress?  
I love it when I get compliments, but I don't dress to engineer compliments.

4) Can you describe any ways in which you might manipulate your image to please others?

I tend to modify what I'm wearing when I know I'm going to see my mother. Mum has a history of being subtly critical of my outfits ("knit dresses tend to make all but the thinnest women look dumpy, don't you think?" Owthch).

Other than that, it's not so much about dressing to 'please' others - I dress (i) to please myself, and (2) it's also very important to me to project a certain image. Thankfully, my two priorities are often in sync :-)

5) What is your opinion of others who do this?

I think it's entirely ubiquitous and normal. I hope they're not JUST manipulating their image to please others though - it's so much fun to experiment with different looks and the different feelings that go with the different looks.

[Reply](#)



5.

[debfi8 July 2012 12:33 AM](#)

Two really helpful responses to questions about perceived identity. Anon 1 has introduced body image in to the mix, and yes, I think that is such a key factor of how confidently we may approach clothes. In some cases, they, clothes have the power to transform our ideas about ourselves, don't you think? Think of children feeling invincible when wearing super-hero costumes.

And anon two, nothing can be more cutting than a snide(albeit without intent to offend us) comment. I have the most amazing knit top I bought about 15 years ago in Century 21 NYC. It's colourful and funky and I always felt unique and comfortable in it, until one day, wearing it to work, one lady said, "Oh Deb, that top makes you look like you are breastfeeding!" Somehow, my playful, funky top was delegated to the back of the wardrobe, never to be worn again. It's still there by the way! And I agree, it isn't as much that I valued her style opinion, it was more that something I really loved had been criticized.

[Reply](#)



6.

**Anonymous**[25 July 2012 9:07 PM](#)

How highly do you value the opinions of others in regard to the way you dress? for me, it's a lovely boost when I receive a compliment and can make a day or evening all the more enjoyable. however I remember "altering" my school uniform and the look of horror, swiftly followed by anger on my Mum's face. as a teenager that could have been the response I wanted but of course now having children of my own .....please forgive me Mum. I do still ask/confere with friends about what the dress code is for a particular occasion. its fun. I trust my daughter's opinion (she is 20 years old), not the "does my bum look too big in this?" but "do you like this on me?". so in answer to the question above. I have a few people in my life who's opinion I value very highly with regards to the way I dress. I'm sure I'm not alone.

[Reply](#)

[Replies](#)

1.



[debf7 August 2012 5:59 AM](#)

yep, sometimes the school uniform and all it represents is our first chance to control our appearance. I love the notion that this could have been rebellion. or then again it maybe wasn't!

[Reply](#)

7.



[Viktoria and the Android7 August 2012 12:18 AM](#)

1) Do you think people misunderstand the messages clothing or body adornment may give? Can you give an example of when this may have happened to you? Yes, definitely. I work in a very conservative company, complete with dress code. It's also a male-dominated industry. Therefore if you are not male and wearing a grey business suit & tie, the options for people formulating an opinion about you are almost limitless. If I wear a suit (I am female, by the way), my hair in a sensible bun, sensible shoes and sensible jewellery, I have found that it makes very little difference than times where I wear my own designs & keep my piercings in. In a corporate environment, conformity and conservatism are expected. Even if you do so, you are likely to be perceived as one rung lower on the scale merely by being female. So, I have fun with what I wear instead, and let people think of me as they will. My work and professional attitude usually are sufficient to gain respect.

2) Do you have any examples of when you thought you were sending message "A" such as "career focused" for example, and it was perceived by someone else as message "B", conservative and uptight? Ummm... not really. I am quite comfortable with how I look (mostly), and tend to be aware in advance whether what I am wearing will be perceived differently by different audiences (eg a typical work outfit was looked at as being quite snobbish on a recent trip out into the suburbs... but I had to go back to the office so needed to dress appropriately for there, even though I knew I would stand out). I think if this is something that concerns people then they could ask themselves "If I saw this outfit on a person in the street, what would I think?"

3) How highly do you value the opinions of others in regard to the way you dress?

At the risk of sounding completely bloody minded... not all that highly. I design and make all my own clothes, have a fairly good idea of what suits me (even though I will still make some sartorial faux pas), and when I dress for myself I am more comfortable than if I dress for someone else. While I value the opinions of other people who design and sew, I don't really obsess about whether everyone likes what I am wearing.

4) Can you describe any ways in which you might manipulate your image to please others? I am more likely to wear plastic dinosaurs in my hair to a board meeting than tone things down to please someone! Which is essentially the same behaviour, only on the other side of the coin. More of a brash statement of "this is me, deal with it" than a conciliatory "please be nice, I am trying to fit in". Both behaviours are designed to elicit a change in others... whether it is favourable or designed to make people sit up and pay attention. What I would NOT do is wear an outfit which portrays an untruth image of who I am eg I would not suddenly start wearing baggy jeans and a backwards baseball cap, even if it would be to my benefit... To me that would be assuming a false persona, portraying myself as someone I am not, and ultimately lying to both myself and those around me. Who knew clothes could make such powerful statements!

5) What is your opinion of others who do this? As I have said, I think most people will do this to a certain degree. I think when it becomes a role you assume (like an actor putting on a costume) is when it becomes a little peculiar.

[Reply](#)



8.

[debfi4 August 2012 2:14 AM](#)

Firstly, can I just thank you for your enthusiastic and open response to the questions posted, these are both extremely helpful, and very insightful. Much appreciated!

Answers to 4 are very true, and you have captured the essence of my research in this answer. How we can both manipulate and create a look to help us achieve "something" is a fascinating human trait. It seems we have moved far away from using clothes to signify our religious, ethnic or political beliefs, and have instead allowed them power to speak for us, and show part of our very unique self... "like an actor putting on a costume".

[Reply](#)



## Appendix B: Informal Interview Questions

Questions about how clothes can make you feel emotionally.

- 1) Is there an outfit or an item of clothing you “love” dearly?
  - a) If so, why do you love it?
  - b) Can you describe the outfit or items?
- 2) Did you have an outfit you used to love, and now don’t feel that way about it anymore?
  - a) Can you say more about that? Why?
- 3) Can you describe when it feels “right” to wear something?
  - a) What is the outfit, can you describe it? Or send a photo?
- 4) Have you experienced wearing something that feels “wrong” to wear?
  - a) What is the outfit, can you describe it? Or send a photo?
- 5) Do you recall a time when you felt you were dressed inappropriately?
  - a) What happened for you to feel that?
  - b) Did it affect your social experience?
- 6) Is there an item of clothing that you feel “matches” how you feel about yourself and how you look?
  - a) Could you expand on how you look and feel about your self-image/body image/identity?
- 7) Do you ever see an item of clothing or dress and think it could transform your emotional state?
  - a) Perhaps make you feel better about yourself?
  - b) Can you give me an example of the item and the emotion it could have transformed?
- 8) Can you recall any time when you may have used clothes to appear as a somewhat different person than who you “really” are?

Questions about wearing clothes and how they feel on your body.

- 9) Do you feel better about your body image when you wear certain items of clothing?
- a) What are they?
- 10) What makes an outfit “comfortable” in your opinion?
- a) Can you give an example of something you feel comfortable wearing?
- 11) Are there any key aspects of a garment or outfit which you always look for when shopping? ( eg. Shoulder pads to broaden shoulders, comfortable waistbands, no zippers...)

Questions about how you link your choice of clothes with the person who you are, or your projected identity.

Social status

- 12) Can you describe your thoughts as put together an outfit to
- a) go to work
- b) go on a date
- c) go shopping
- d) go to the gym or exercise
- 13) Is there a time when you think an outfit has contributed positively to a social experience?
- 14) Has there ever been a time when you have changed your choices of clothing for certain social occasions?
- 15) In what ways do you think social groups influence clothing choices?
- a) Have you experienced that yourself?
- 16) Do you have an example where you have chosen an outfit to represent your social status?
- 17) Do you choose clothes that demonstrate your income? In what ways?
- 18) Have you had an experience where your clothing choices acted to unify or separate you from your social groups

Ethnicity

- 19) Do you think it is important to dress to show your ethnic background?
- 20) If you were to wear a traditional garment that wasn't from your ethnic background, would you be uncomfortable?

21) If traditionally clothing helped to identify various ethnic groups and tribes, what does it represent in today's society?

#### Influences

22) Is there someone you consider a style muse, someone whose style you try to emulate?

a) If so what is it about the person's style that appeals to you?

b) Is this someone you aspire to be?

23) Do you think television weight loss and makeover shows influence your opinions of your self-image?

a) If so, in what ways?

b) Can you give me an example of something positive?

c) Do you have an experience where watching a show about image has been negative for you?

d) If so, could you describe that experience?

24) What extent are you prepared to change your physical image in order to match it to your view of yourself?

25) Have you any experience where you have felt strongly influenced by other people's opinions of your image?

Questions about how people respond to your appearance or your perceived identity.

26) Do you think people misunderstand the messages clothing or body adornment may give?

a) Do you have any examples of when you thought you were sending message A such as "career focused" for example, and it was perceived by someone else as message B, conservative and uptight?

27) How highly do you value the opinions of others in regard to the way you dress?

28) Can you describe any ways in which you might manipulate your image to please others?

29) What is your opinion of others who do this?

## Appendix C: Questionnaire Responses

Question	Key Constructs
<b>Is there an outfit or an item of clothing you “love” dearly?</b> <b>If so, why do you love it?</b> <b>Can you describe the outfit or items?</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cocktail dress evokes memory of happiest times</li> <li>• Attachment</li> <li>• It’s a personal record of a magical day</li> <li>• Attachment-“It is my dad in object form”</li> <li>• Attract positive comments</li> <li>• Attachment</li> <li>• Memory-Young, healthy, carefree</li> </ul>
<b>Did you have an outfit you used to love, and now don’t feel that way about it anymore?</b> <b>Can you say more about that?</b> <b>Why?</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Measure of success/failure</li> <li>• My sartorial journey in life is strewn with clothes I should never have bought in the first place - they were a fashion faux pas</li> <li>• Let down, disappointed</li> <li>• Identification-</li> <li>• I've simply moved on from them and what they signify.</li> <li>• Measure of success/failure-</li> <li>• Identification-stylishness</li> <li>• Appearance enhanced</li> <li>• Served purpose</li> <li>• Self image</li> </ul>
<b>Can you describe when it feels “right” to wear something?</b> <b>What is the outfit, can you describe it? Or send a photo?</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Appearance enhanced</li> <li>• Served purpose</li> <li>• Appearance enhanced</li> <li>• Sense of self image is satisfied</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Camouflage/Armour/protection</li> <li>•</li> </ul>
<p><b>Have you experienced wearing something that feels “wrong” to wear?</b></p> <p><b>What is the outfit, can you describe it? Or send a photo?</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not a Risk</li> <li>• Camouflage Armour/protection</li> <li>• enclose/hide/protect/secure</li> <li>• Uncomfortable message</li> <li>• Uncomfortable and exposed</li> <li>• Uncomfortable/wrongness</li> </ul>
<p><b>Do you recall a time when you felt you were dressed inappropriately?</b></p> <p><b>What happened for you to feel that?</b></p> <p><b>Did it affect your social experience?</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emotional ruin</li> <li>• Self worth/judgement</li> <li>• dictated by our</li> <li>• culture's expectations/standards.</li> <li>• False perceptions</li> <li>• Negative judgement</li> <li>• Judgement</li> </ul>
<p><b>Is there an item of clothing that you feel “matches” how you feel about yourself and how you look?</b></p> <p><b>Could you expand on how you look and feel about your self-image/body image/identity?</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Camouflage</li> <li>• According to “ideal Self”</li> <li>• Manage behaviour</li> <li>• Body image</li> <li>• Expression</li> <li>• Camouflage/armour/protection</li> <li>• Avoids reflection</li> </ul>
<p><b>Do you ever see an item of clothing or dress and think it could transform your emotional state?</b></p> <p><b>Perhaps make you feel better about yourself?</b></p> <p><b>Can you give me an example of</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emotional transformation</li> <li>• Self-esteem</li> <li>• Body Image</li> <li>• Celebrity mimicry</li> <li>• Self-esteem</li> <li>• Body Image</li> <li>• Emotional response/comfort</li> </ul>

<b>the item and the emotion it could have transformed?</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emotional response</li> </ul>
<b>Can you recall any time when you may have used clothes to appear as a somewhat different person than who you “really” are?</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social acceptance</li> <li>• Celebrity mimicry</li> <li>• Self image/true self</li> <li>• Self satisfaction</li> <li>• Identity management</li> </ul>
<b>Can you describe your thoughts as put together an outfit to go to work go on a date go shopping go to the gym or exercise</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Construct it!</li> <li>• Identity management</li> <li>• Identity management</li> <li>• Insecurity of choice/selection</li> <li>• Identity management</li> <li>• Camouflage/armour/</li> <li>• protection/power</li> <li>• Camouflage/armour/</li> <li>• protection/power</li> <li>• Attraction</li> <li>• Functionality</li> </ul>
<b>Is there a time when you think an outfit has contributed positively to a social experience?</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Confidence/reward</li> <li>• Unreliable</li> <li>• Reward</li> <li>• Attraction/attention</li> <li>• Transformation</li> </ul>
<b>Has there ever been a time when you have changed your choices of clothing for certain social occasions?</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Wrong message/ mis-communication</li> <li>• Identity management</li> <li>• Armour/protection</li> </ul>
<b>In what ways do you think social groups influence</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ostracized/left out</li> <li>• Identity management</li> </ul>

<b>clothing choices?</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Outcome manipulation</li> </ul>
<b>Have you experienced that yourself?</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Associate plain with practical</li> <li>• Brand recognition</li> <li>• Identity management</li> <li>• Armour/ protection</li> </ul>
<b>Do you have an example where you have chosen an outfit to represent your social status?</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social reward/ inclusion</li> <li>• Social exclusion</li> <li>• Sustainable</li> <li>• Pride/quality/knowledge</li> <li>• Identity management</li> <li>• Brand recognition</li> <li>• Social inclusion</li> <li>• Brand recognition</li> <li>• Mindful of cultural difference</li> </ul>
<b>Do you choose clothes that demonstrate your income? In what ways?</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Advertise social class</li> <li>• Price versus brand?</li> <li>• Brand recognition</li> </ul>
<b>Have you had an experience where your clothing choices acted to unify or separate you from your social groups</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social inclusion through style</li> <li>• Social exclusion</li> <li>• Brand rejection</li> <li>• Social exclusion</li> <li>• Social inclusion</li> <li>• Social exclusion through body image</li> <li>• Tribal bonding</li> <li>• “right” is imperative</li> <li>• Globalisation</li> </ul>
<b>Do you think it is important to dress to show your ethnic background?</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social inclusion</li> <li>• Globalizations effects</li> <li>• Social exclusion</li> <li>• Wrong “fit” with self image</li> <li>• Forced inclusion</li> </ul>

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<b>If you were to wear a traditional garment that wasn't from your ethnic background, would you be uncomfortable?</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Wrong fit with self image</li> <li>• Disrespectful</li> <li>• Interpretation of style</li> </ul>
<b>If traditionally clothing helped to identify various ethnic groups and tribes, what does it represent in today's society?</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Groups and tribes</li> <li>• Tribes, just different types</li> <li>• Self expression</li> <li>• Pride</li> <li>• National identification</li> <li>• Women more so then men,</li> <li>• Political connotations</li> </ul>
<b>Is there someone you consider a style muse, someone whose style you try to emulate?</b> <b>If so what is it about the person's style that appeals to you?</b> <b>Is this someone you aspire to be?</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Powerful, Feminine, sexual</li> <li>• True fit with self-image</li> <li>• Celebrity mimicry</li> <li>• Body as Locus</li> <li>• Style and knowing</li> <li>• Muse not idolization</li> <li>• Be you</li> <li>• Say no to emulation</li> </ul>
<b>Do you think television weight loss and makeover shows influence your opinions of your self-image?</b> <b>If so, in what ways?</b> <b>Can you give me an example of something positive?</b> <b>Do you have an experience</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Media influence-happiness and weight loss</li> <li>• Educate self esteem</li> <li>• Social inclusion</li> <li>• Social exclusion</li> <li>• Self esteem</li> <li>• Body image</li> <li>• Reward-Felt better about themselves</li> </ul>

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**where watching a show about  
image has been negative for  
you?**

- I'm not

**If so, could you describe that  
experience?**

**What extent are you prepared  
to change your physical image  
in order to match it to your  
view of yourself?**

- Physical-weight loss
- Display identity
- Some considerations
- Aging-identifies the me I am  
becoming
- Health & positive reinforcement
- Negative reinforcement experience  
height

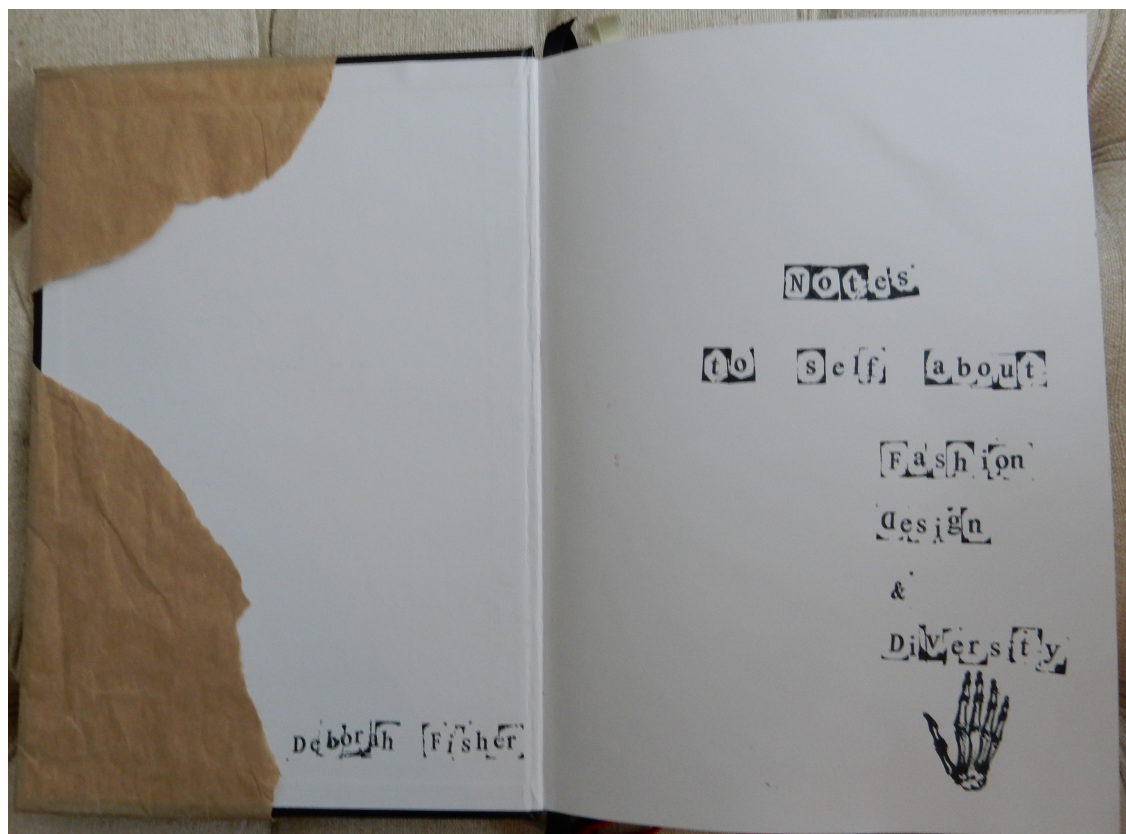
**Have you any experience  
where you have felt strongly  
influenced by other people's  
opinions of your image?**

- Social inclusion/exclusion
  - Memory
  - Social exclusion
  - Lack of confidence
  - Self image
  - Social exclusion
  - Negative reinforcement experience
-

## Appendix D: Visual Diary for Reflective Practice

### Notes to Self about Fashion Design and Diversity

Wrapped in plain brown paper, with masking tape holding its torn corners, the cover of my visual diary suggests the aesthetic approach to the project. Here, wrapped in plain wrapping, the viewer has few clues to the contents; the neutrality of the cover and title page reinforces the concept of humble packaging or covering through its lack of flourished and embellished design. There is a sense of deconstruction to the aesthetics: it captures a sense of what Calderin



would call the “unfinished, decomposed and reassembled” (Schön 1983) which deepens the semiotic reading of journal .

Figure 7: Title page, visual diary

The title page accentuates the unwrapping theme. The significance of the hand refers to the making of the visual diary as a direct outcome of my actions. The

style of the rubber stamp letters inspires thoughts of ransom notes I have seen in American hostage movies.



Figure 8: Dear Self

The poem, *Dear Self*, was an initial response to the research, my personal thoughts reflecting on the data from questionnaire responses collected through the blog. Writing the poem after receiving the questionnaire responses became a reflective exercise that in and of itself provided significant structure for the project to continue. The poem provides an underlying narrative that forms a critical discussion about the conditions. Inspired by existential stream of consciousness form and Beatnik spoken word poetry, the poem's theme is a summary of all the conditions I felt compelled to explore from the research. In it, I confess my sorrow at being a contributor to the angst the women feel.

## Condition 1: We are not the same...

*In this form,*

*I cannot help you find yourself,*

*I will search though, I will try to find if you have depth and width*

*I shall create for you*

*and give you a name, it's all I can do for now...*

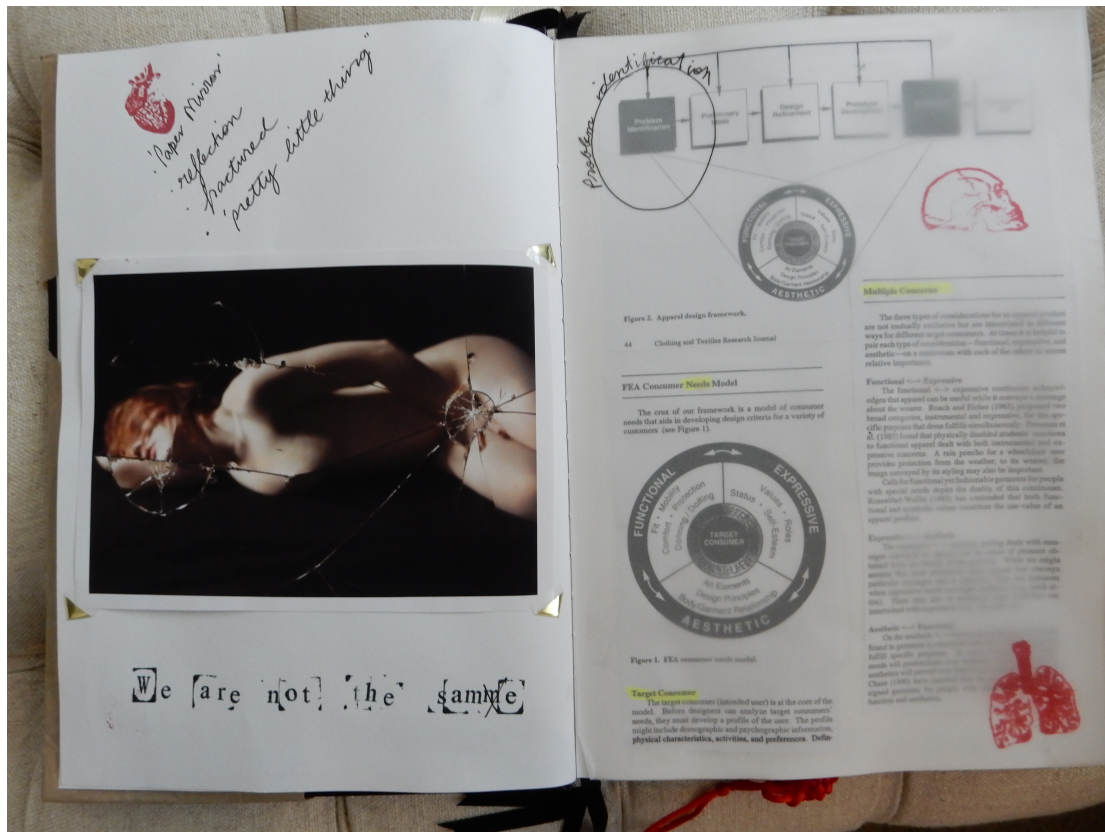


Figure 9: We are not the same<sup>30</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Here the problem of our deep concern over how we appear to others in public is identified and consolidated. This condition speaks to design model which emphasises the need for clothing to address "the function, the aesthetic and the expressive self" as noted by Black and Stokes (2011, 178). This is the most self-reflective of the conditions; in it, I explore my role in the fashion industry, my contribution to the problem of women's relationship to dress, and consider approaches to creating resolutions to this problem through design. The image of a woman's reflection in a broken mirror suggests that the image is shattered or broken, but I take it to mean more than that; she appears damaged, and I reflect upon how my work in the fashion industry has perpetuated the damage. I ask "What is my role in this?" A strong theme, which emerged from the participants' input, suggested the fashion industry treats women only as consumers, with no understanding of the real needs of the individual women in the study. Here I identify the need to understand diversity and approach potential target customers with statistical distance.



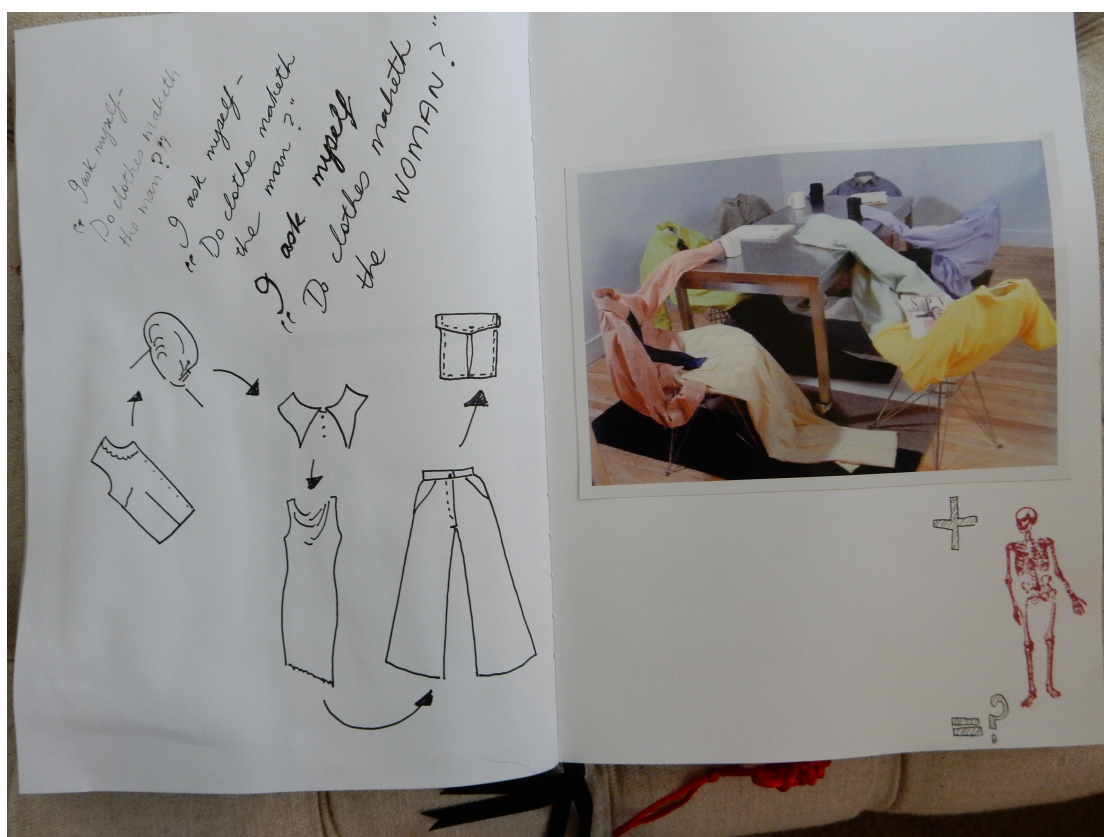


Figure 10: What are clothes without a body? <sup>31</sup>

<sup>31</sup> *In the design studio, I see dress as the sum of all its parts; I fret over the width of a pocket flap or the size and shape of button to be used on a particular jacket. The width and height of a hem causes great concern in the industry, yet to the woman in the study, such things mean very little. For the research participants, a successful garment was one that made them feel appropriately dressed, flattered or comfortable, or was associated with a sense of fondness through memory of occasions when it was worn or of a person who gave it to them.*

## Condition 2: In this place...

*In this place,  
I am not the same as you,  
my story comes from my own historic battle,  
my wars and victories  
Skulls on my mantle to remind me of home*

This condition exists through the fashion industry's appropriation of cultural, religious, or tribal clothing and traditional costume. Whilst there is such beauty to capture in ethnic design, the greater issue here is "in-appropriation", a term I use to describe when the item, object or detail is culturally insensitive and disrespectful.

More specifically, I address the concerns wearing the wrong outfit to an event; being out of place as such. We feel a fear of standing out for being different, and for not being clearly identified with the right tribe I found this concern with appearing *wrong* contradicted the women's comments communicating a desire for individuality, yet it was a common response. My intuitive response to this data was a sense that "place" comes with pre-set and predetermined notions of what one should wear and how it should be worn. I use this condition to illuminate the "when you feel out of place" feeling.

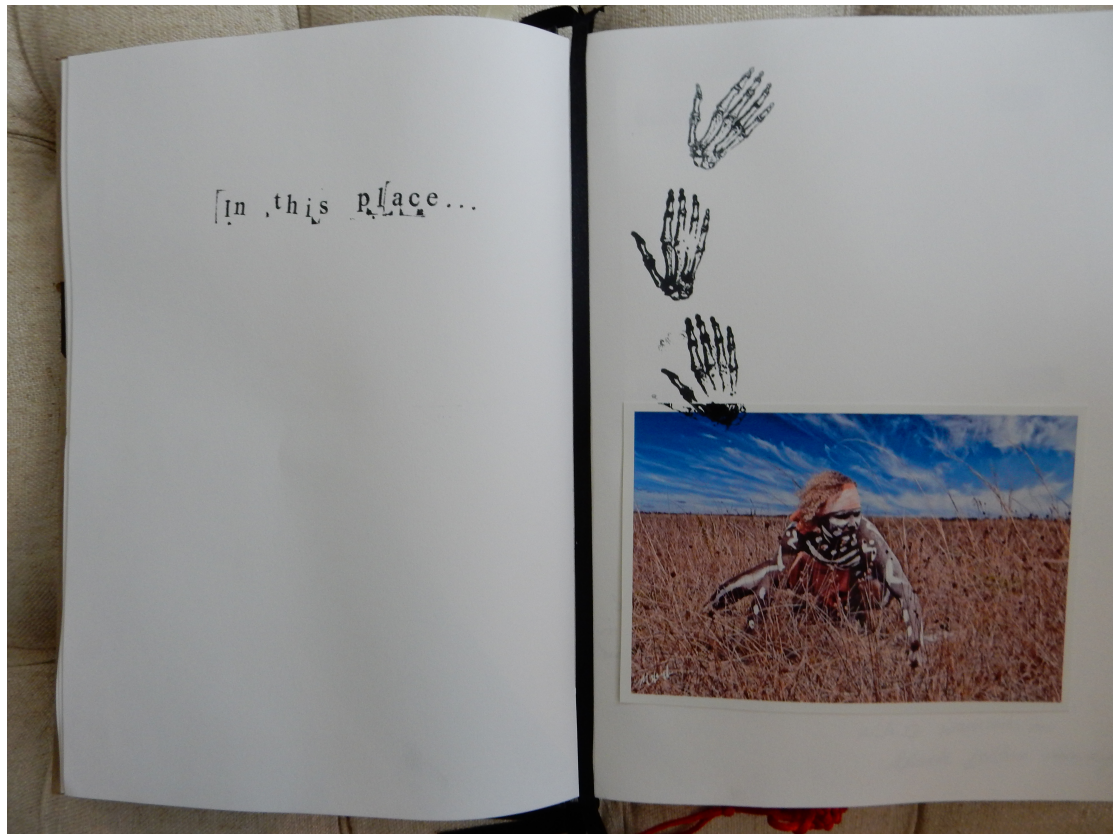


Figure 11: In this place



Figure 12: White woman in black fella's candy <sup>32</sup>

<sup>32</sup> On the left, a group of happy boys, comfortable in decoration – body paint, flowers and vines. On the right, a woman wearing a hair wrap of mixed patterns inspired by South African traditional dress, her face painted in a dot art style, associated with those used by groups indigenous to various places around the world, and sporting plastic, geometric, contemporary style western jewellery. It strikes me as an odd combination!





Figure 13: Birds of a feather <sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> On the left, the men of various tribes, majestically proud in costumes that feature feathers as part of ceremonial dress; on the right, models sit backstage waiting for a runway show to begin in London. Not so majestic...



Figure 14: This is how I look, this is how you think I look!

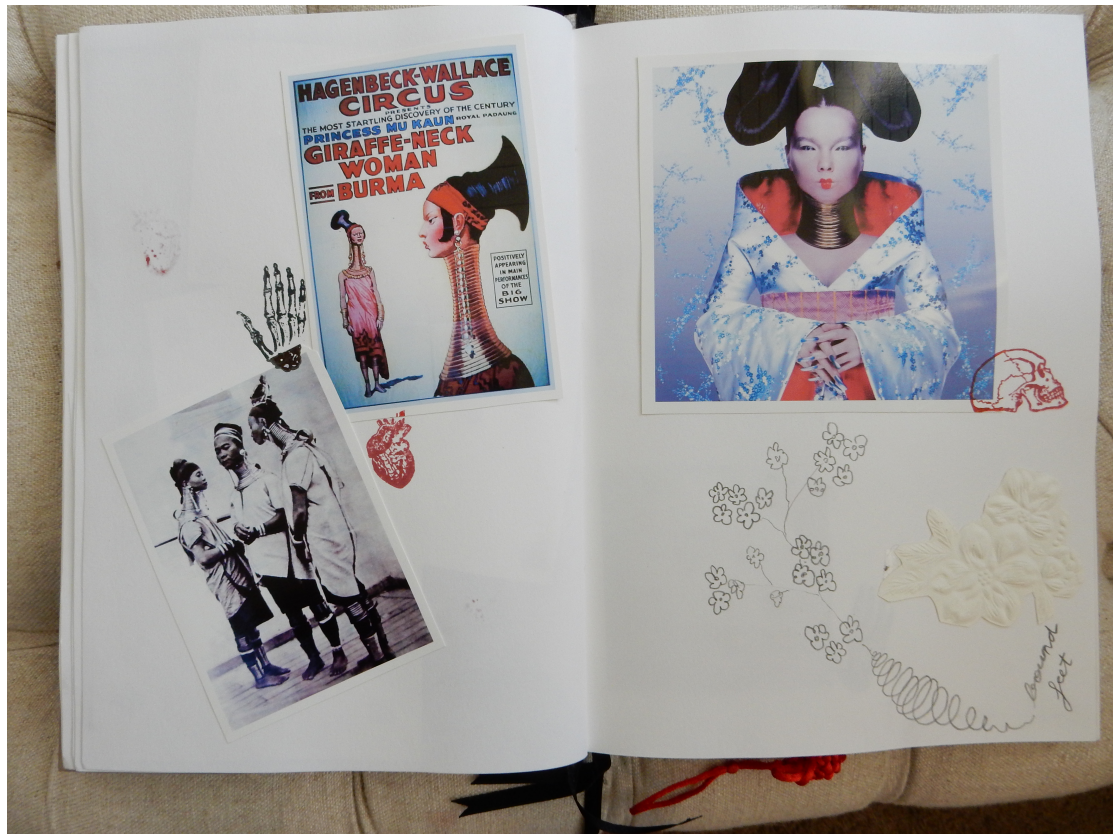


Figure 15: Now I am in a circus but in my land I am a queen





Figure 16: It is illusion, it is not me...<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> *The beauty and elegance of the Japanese Geisha, white face, and red lips...*



Figure 17: "KISS" geisha <sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> In contrast with the Geisha dress, "Kiss" band look-a-likes...

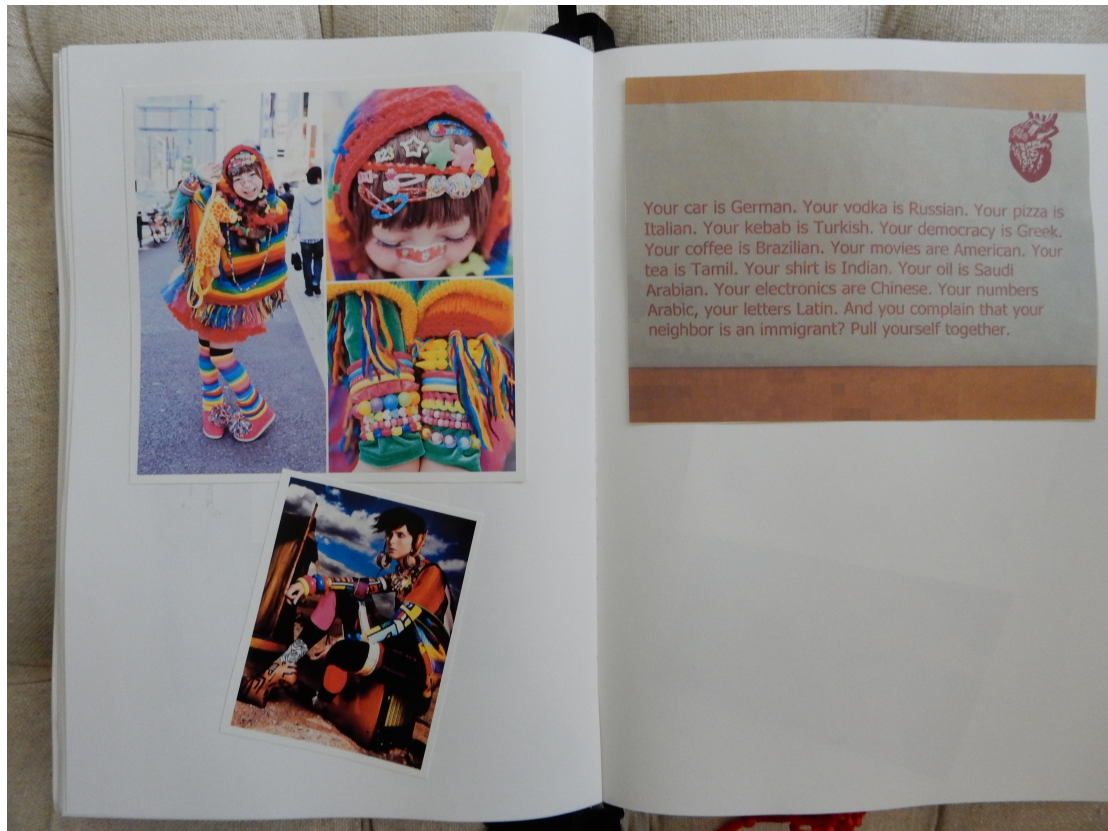


Figure 18: I am a child of multi-cultcha! <sup>36</sup>

<sup>36</sup> *Mixing of cultural or ethnic aesthetics creates exciting and dynamic design inspiration, but where does one draw the line, where does it become too much?*



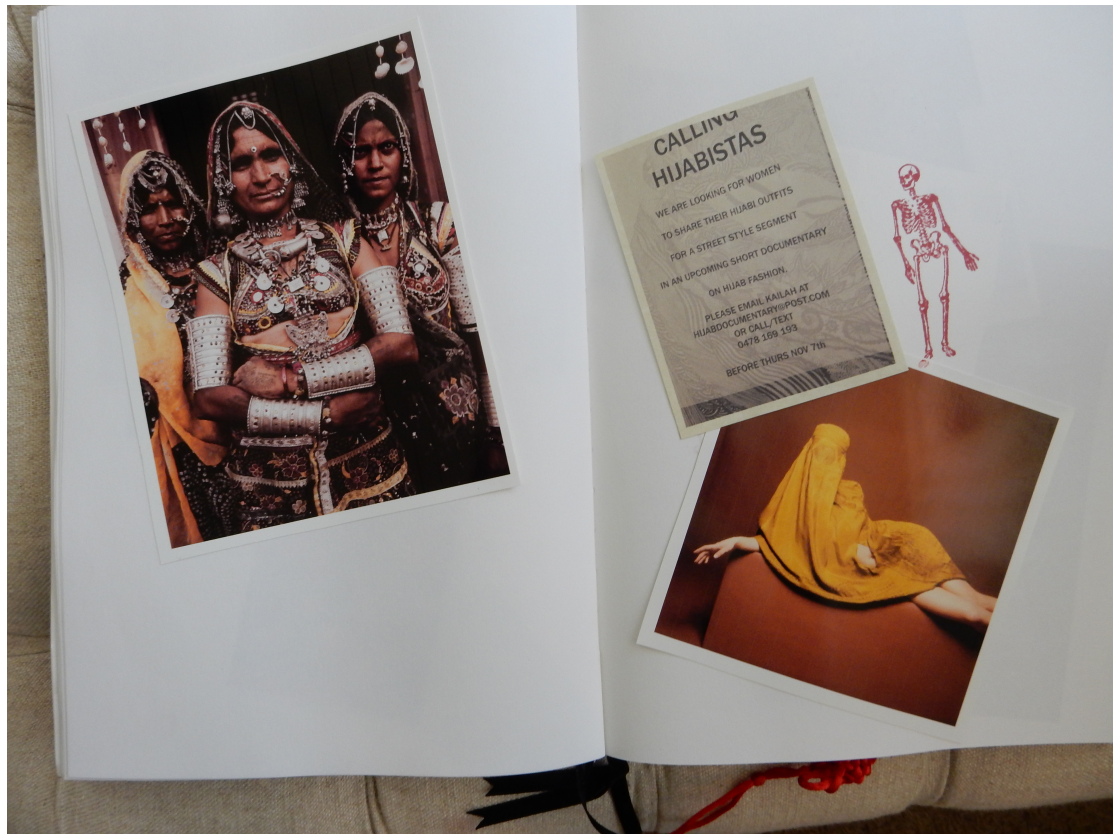


Figure 19: Calling Hijabistas for fashion shoot.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>37</sup> The jewellery on these Taureg women shows their wealth and social status. It is an important and significant measure of their place in society. The Hijab has significant value to Muslim women as a way of being identified as part of something.



Figure 20: Glorify the very things we have lost.





Figure 21: I am terrazzo. The future of ethnicity is multi cultural, multi racial, multi faith...<sup>38</sup>

<sup>38</sup> A National Geographic study, based on how people self-identified in the 2000 USA census, determined that the images above represent how all Americans will look in the future due to inter-racial parenting (2012).

### Condition 3: In this time...

***In this time,***

*I dress you up and then strip you bare,*

*I bind you and wrap you,*

*I take away your identity and give you mine*

*but mine is yours, I am old and just out of time.*

This condition speaks to the aging woman, the one whose self image is changing, whose social role is fluidly being redefined, who's bombarded with images of young and pretty women as the social norm, yet who is, as a member of a consumer sector, quite invisible. Twigg suggests older women wish to dress to be acceptable, to look nice and "pass muster" (2013, 81). The principle of conformity is not unique to Britain, where Twigg conducted her research; like her participants, the older women in my study were also quite oblivious to the idea that "clothing could express or perform one's identity" (2013). This proves curious to me, what role then did dress play for the women? As in Twigg's study, some women in this study noted there was a difference in how they dressed, how they felt they were expected to dress and how they felt the clothes they chose now as older women, said little about who they were. The idea of age ordering in dress, described by Twigg as a process "whereby certain forms of clothing are deemed appropriate – or more significant, inappropriate – for people as they age" (Twigg 2013, 52) is another consideration. From professional experience I have heard anecdotes of items that remained in women's wardrobes from when they were younger, which they were fond of, or had felt comfortable in, but which would now feel unsuitable. One respondent to the questionnaire spoke of a baseball jacket given to her by her father when she was very young, and which she still has for memorabilia sake. As a reflective practitioner, I question where age ordering comes from? Who says some clothes are unsuitable for women of a certain age? What folklore perpetuates this myth? Television shows that are categorised as self-help and/or entertainment are, at

times, humiliating and insulting to the women in them, who are so eager for a make-over to appear younger. The stylists in these shows prescribe change by a set of out- dated and unofficial criteria.

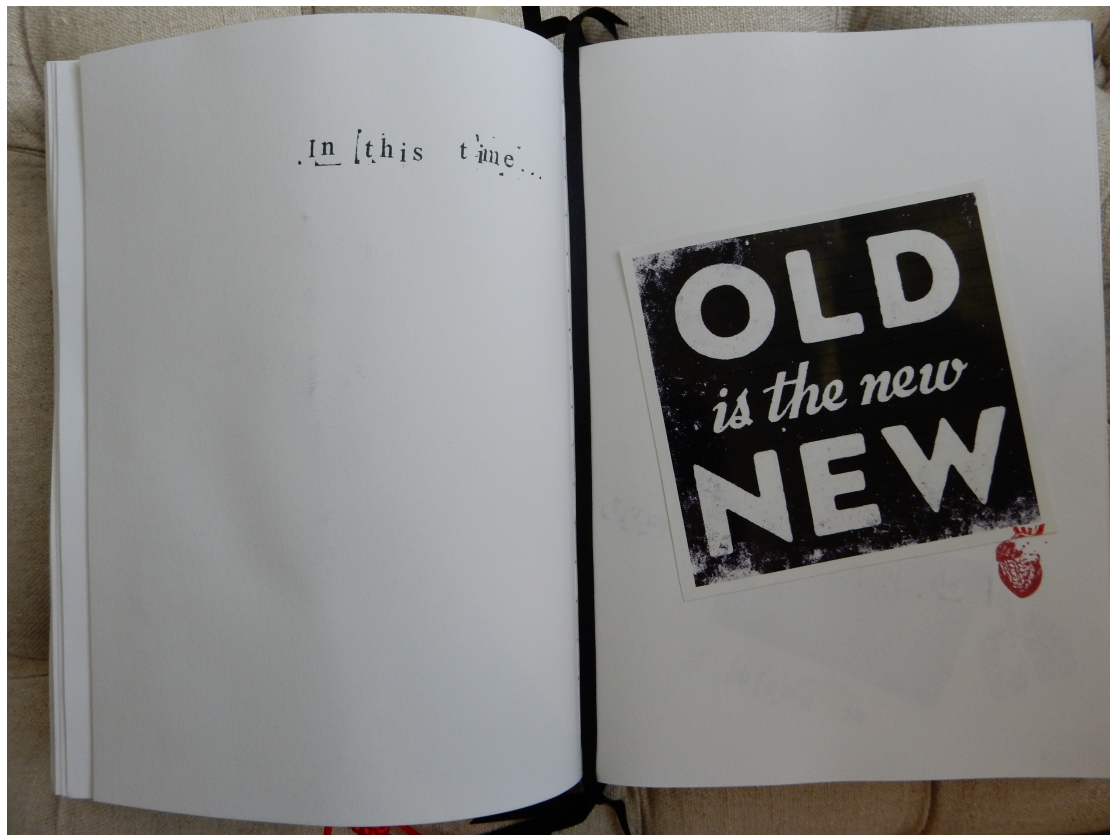


Figure 22: In this time...<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> This market is growing. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, by 2061 the population of over sixty-five year olds will increase to between 9 million and 11.1 million, a rapid increase from 3.2 million in 2012 (Funderburg 2013). By 2069, 3.5 million of Australia's population will be over 85 (ABS 2013). In terms of a consumer target group, the needs of this group will not be fashion in terms of trend-right, fad-driven design; instead, they will be access clothing for medical benefits, for comfort and ease of mobility.

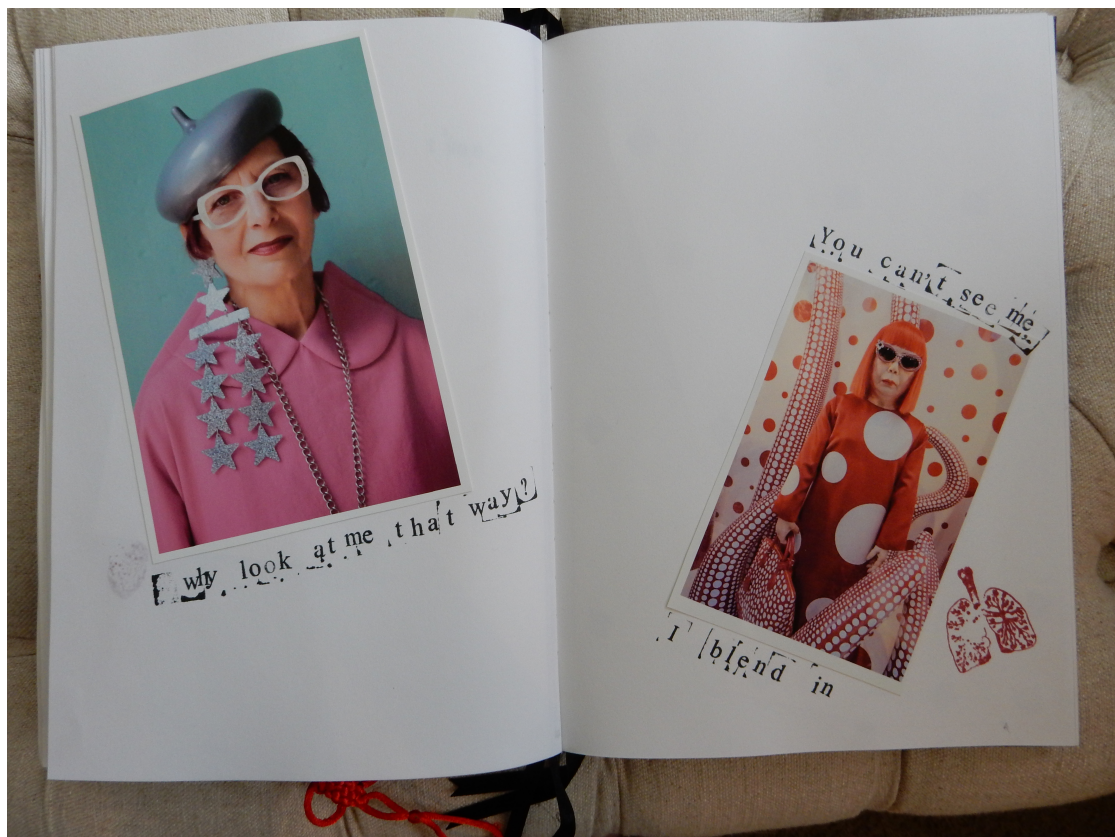


Figure 23: I am old, not invisible!





Figure 24: Inside every older person is a younger person wondering what the hell happened.

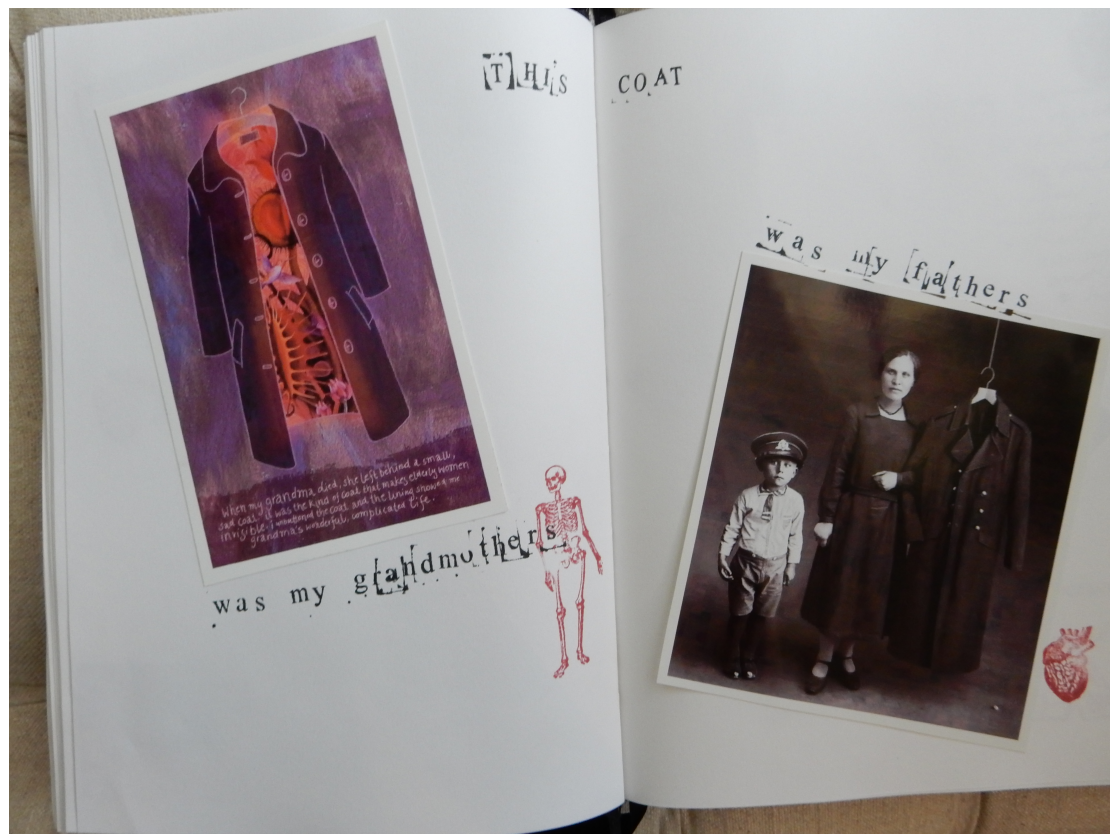


Figure 25: I remember this coat, it was my grandmother, it was her!<sup>40</sup>

<sup>40</sup> A coat found to contain an embroidered story on the lining of all the things that happened to someone in their life: such a profound way to capture the memory through embodiment. On the right, a photograph of a military style, double-breasted coat, hanging on a hanger; I imagine it belonged to the father of the boy in the picture. Immediately after I first saw the photo, a sense of loss struck me; had the father died in service? Hanging there, bodiless, the coat becomes a representation of loss, sorrow, pain, abandonment and longing.

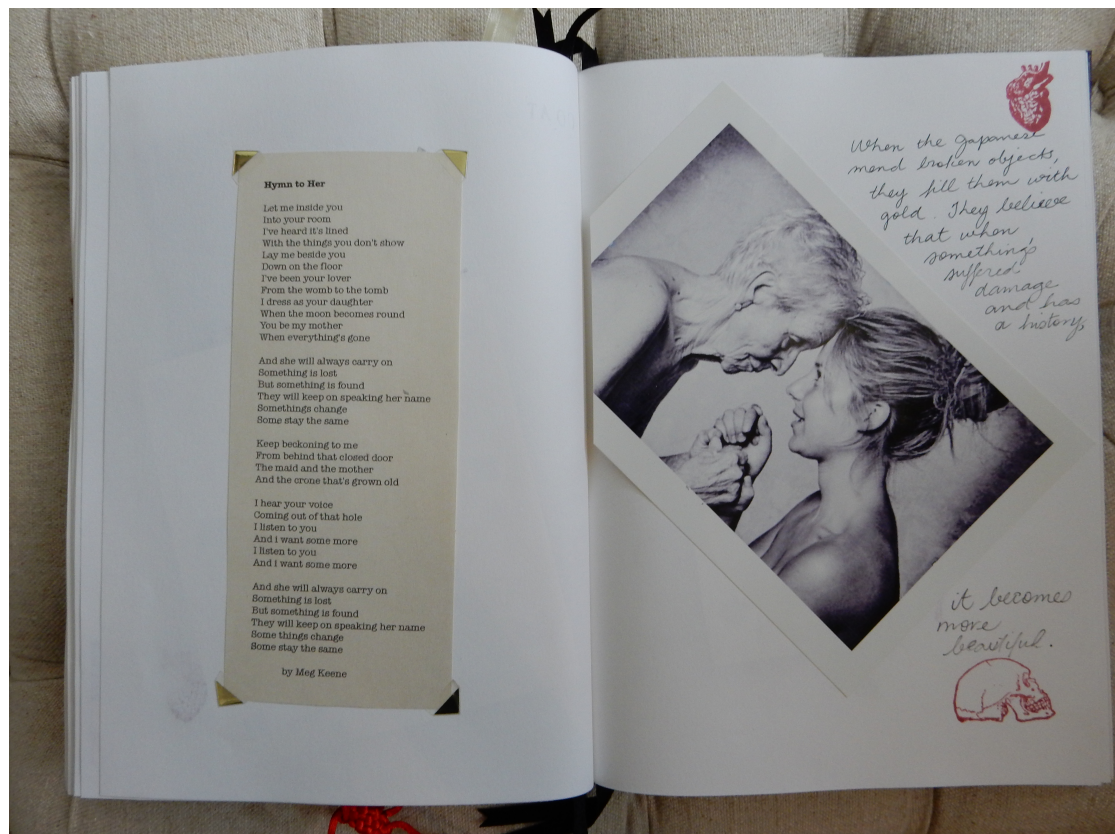


Figure 26: Hymn to Her.



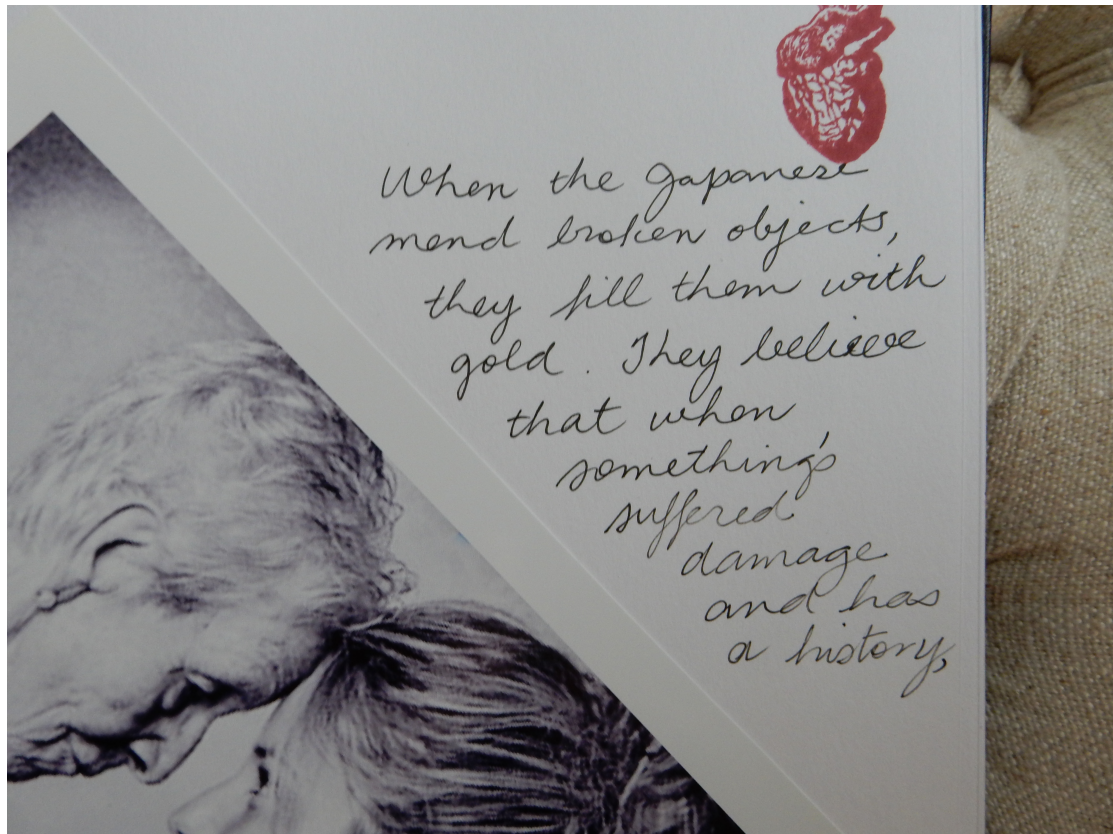


Figure 27: You should be filled with gold. <sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> I find this image very poignant, and presented it with a brief paragraph, which states:

*When the Japanese mend broken objects,  
they fill them with gold.  
They believe that when something's suffered damage  
and has history,  
it becomes more beautiful...*  
Anon





Figure 28: Like you are now, I was once young, I had friends, I danced, I loved...<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> These images provoke thoughts of youth, friendship, belonging and togetherness – the active, agile body in contrast to the aging and physically deteriorating one.



Figure 29: I am me, she is her, but we are the same inside and out...



Figure 30: I won't fade away, I am beautiful I have style, I have grace...<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Breaking the beige colour code, strong and empowered by colour in their dress – no pastels here!



#### Condition 4: In this body...

***In this body,***

*we shy away from you, you are not the science,*

*you are not the future, yet you are!*

*Believe in yourself, you are whole,*

*you are more than love.*

This condition, body image, applies to all ages. Its symptoms lack of confidence and the desire for something that can't be had – to look prettier or to be slimmer – and it prompts women to go to great lengths – cosmetic surgery, or dieting.

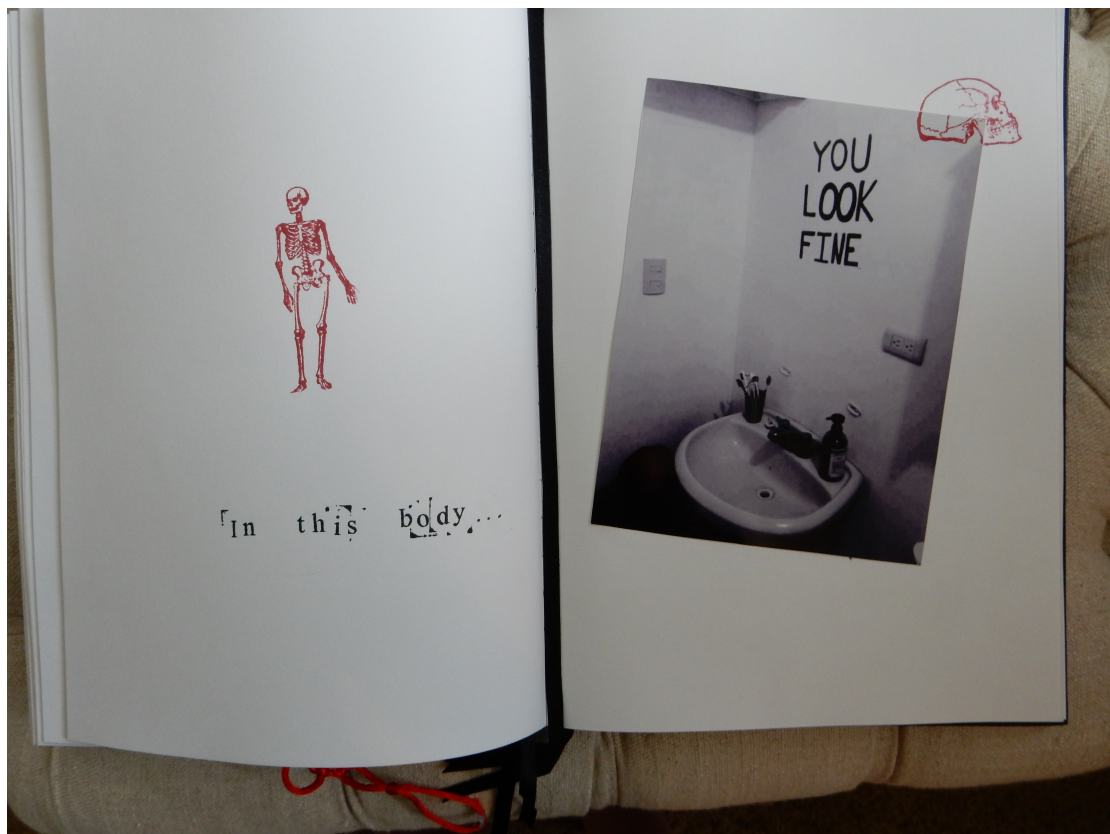


Figure 31: In this body...

I find this image very provocative, a mirror removed, and in its absence on the wall is scrawled, "YOU LOOK FINE". I read this two ways: firstly, as a humorous condemnation of vanity. Secondly, in sharp contrast I see it as a sad comment on our need for external reassurance that our appearance is 'acceptable'.



Figure 32: We are average women, are we not?



Figure 33: Normal Jean "Barbie" Doll





Figure 34: Visual representation in advertising and visual merchandising is a reflection of society...not!

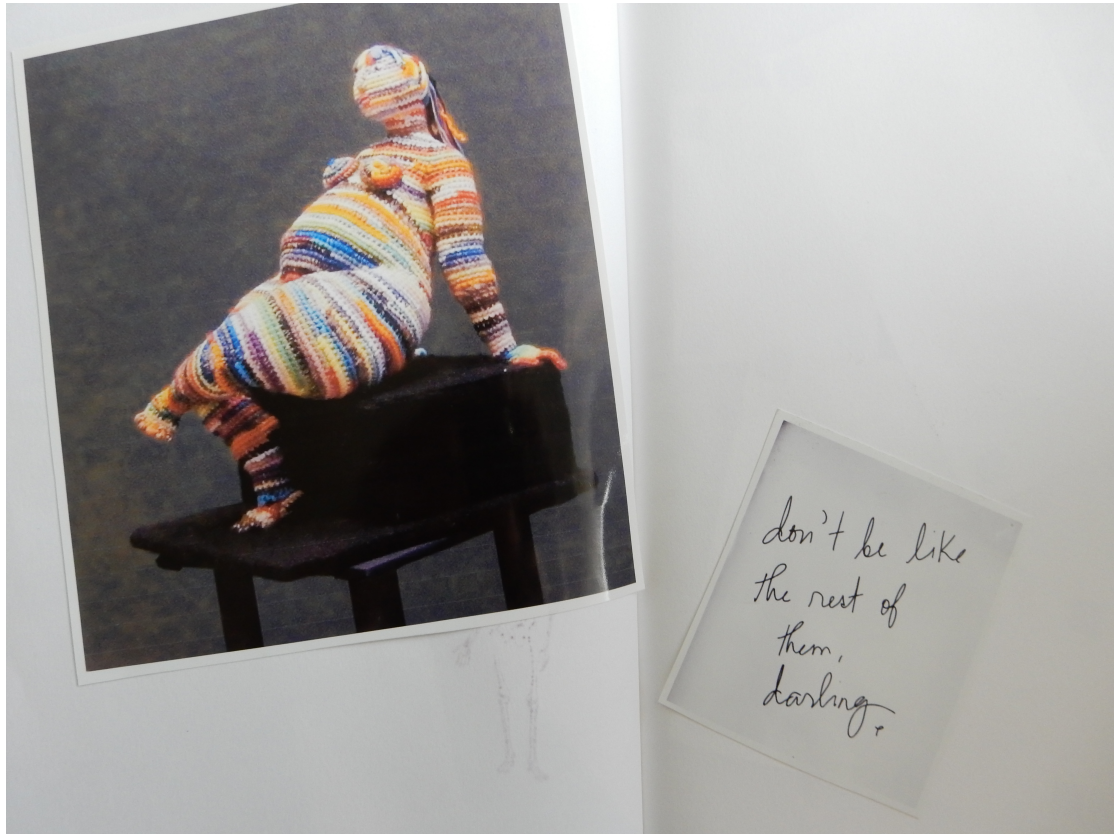


Figure 35: Don't be like the rest of them darling X





Figure 36: Does my butt look big in this... no really, I love my curves!



Figure 37: As the sands of time... so are the days of our lives.

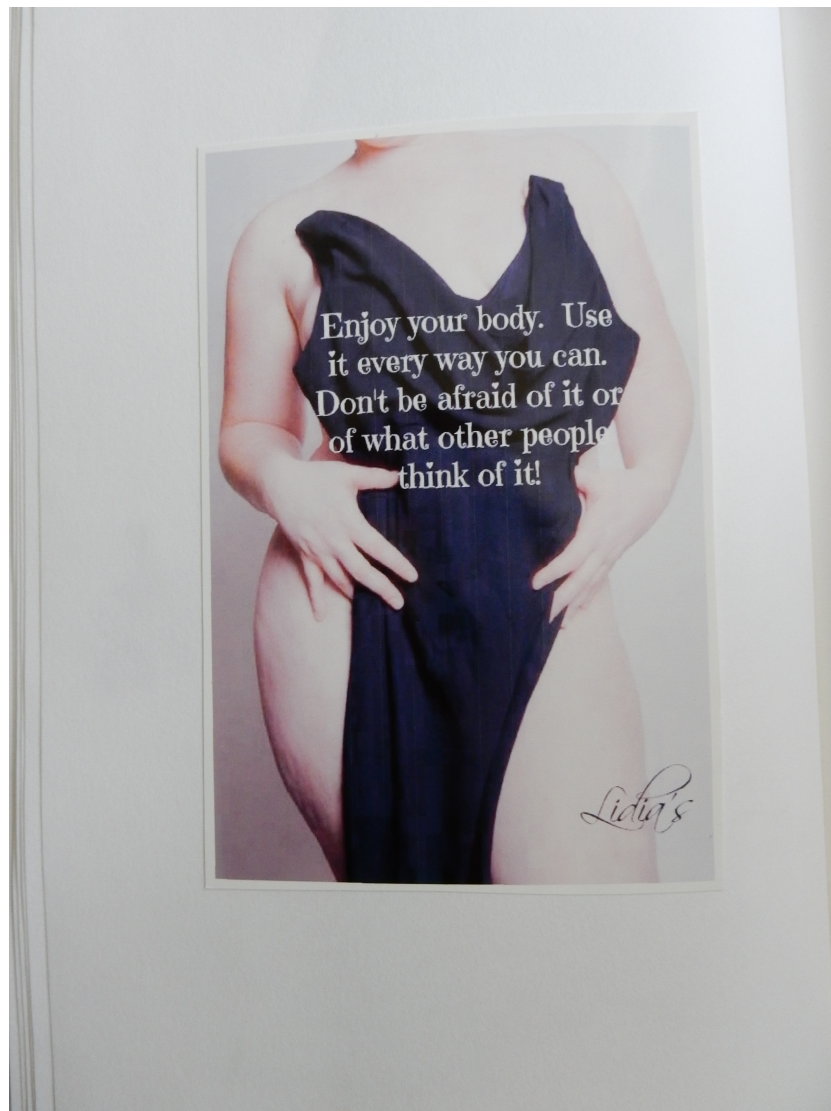


Figure 38: Intervention <sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Body image is subjective, of course. Ideals of beauty fluctuate with fashion cycles. In this sense, what at any given time is considered the ideal is a temporary snapshot of society's view of beauty only at that particular time. For women, this may mean we feel we are never completely 'ideal'. This reflects the ideas discussed in the section, Theme 2: Clothing and its effect on body image.





Figure 39: Come on, dare you, challenge you to show me a real man...coz a fake  
man wouldn't want this? 45

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<sup>45</sup> There is a sinister tone to the statement, Initially I thought it very loaded with gendered nuance, but as I placed it on the page, I was provoked to anger. Her pose, her lack of clothing and situation on the bed, is somehow presented as a macho-esque dare, that if a man were really to love "this" entire woman, he would have won some kind of challenge, like climbing Mt. Everest

### Condition 5- in this dysphoria...

***In this dystopia,***

*is my disturbia, opposite of Utopia,*

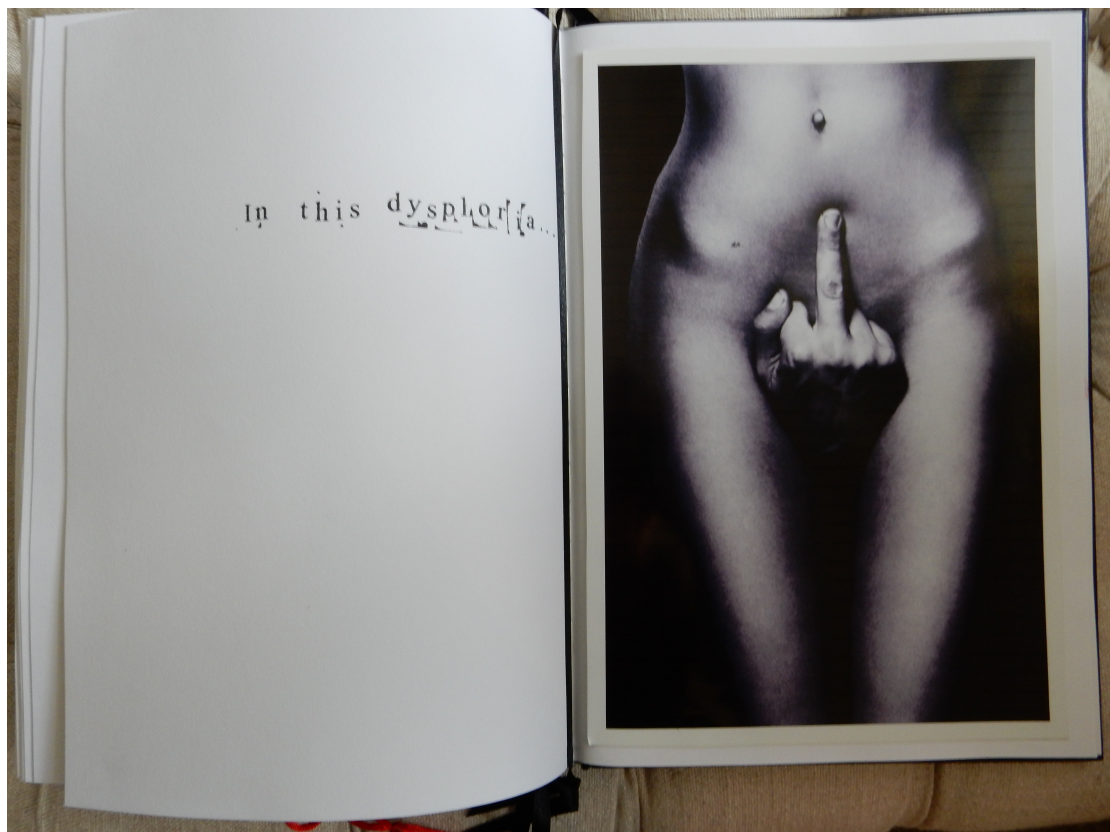
*banished to dwell at your borders and beg for your crumbs*

*I am woman but I can not bear child*

*I am man, but I am not male*

This condition speaks to gender, particularly how clothes can confuse or disguise one's physical gender. Currently there is an emerging trend of using transgender models wearing gender-neutral clothing in runway shows. Designers such as Marc Jacobs and Jean Paul Gaultier, who are known for creating strong social messages, used Melbourne model Andreja Pejic, who has undergone sexual re-assignment surgery, as a female muse (2013, 52). In one sense, these designers are contributing to breaking taboos but in another sense, using pale, thin, and traditionally beautiful in a feminine way Pejic contributes to perpetuating a white Anglo-Saxon, fair skinned and very slender ideal of femininity. In no way do I wish to make light of the physiological or psychological aspects of Gender Dysphoria, but as clothing choice is one of the diagnostic tools used in identifying this condition (Loriot 2014), repeated comments by the participants in my research about feeling a need to "dress feminine" or "sexy", take on a new light. Clothing designers at various times throughout history have challenged gender representation in dress, particularly during the 1970s, when designers like Rudi Gernreich and Yves St. Laurent explored masculine dress items for women. But the impact of clothing designers in challenging or contributing to restrictive gender roles is not the key area of interest to me in this section of the research. The idea that the fluidity of gender presents a challenge to women in selecting dress that will make them (or we) – feel accepted in different contexts – with friends, picking up kids from kindy, at work – while also expressing their (or our) understanding of themselves (ourselves) is what I am trying to explore here.

I raise this point because much of the meaning of fashion and clothing comes from representation on runways and advertising campaigns. These media have powerful influence over their audiences. Using models outside the 'norm' gives fashion participants opportunities to see themselves reflected in the fashion system. Whilst dabbling in androgyny through unisex design, fashion commentators have looked at those collections as a sexualised or subversive fashion (Loriot 2014). This led to what Arnold describes as "Gender confusion" by fashions commentators (Loriot 2014, 70), in what I see as a very critical shift in representation of gender in media and fashion promotion, the transgendered, re-assigned gender image now sits in a category like no other. Messages about transgender are no longer subversive; they are now seen as celebratory. Arnold suggests the "dichotomy of masculine/feminine was gradually eroded during the twentieth century, undermined by the shifting power structures of industrialised society and the crumbling of empires" (2001).



*Figure 40: In this dysphoria*

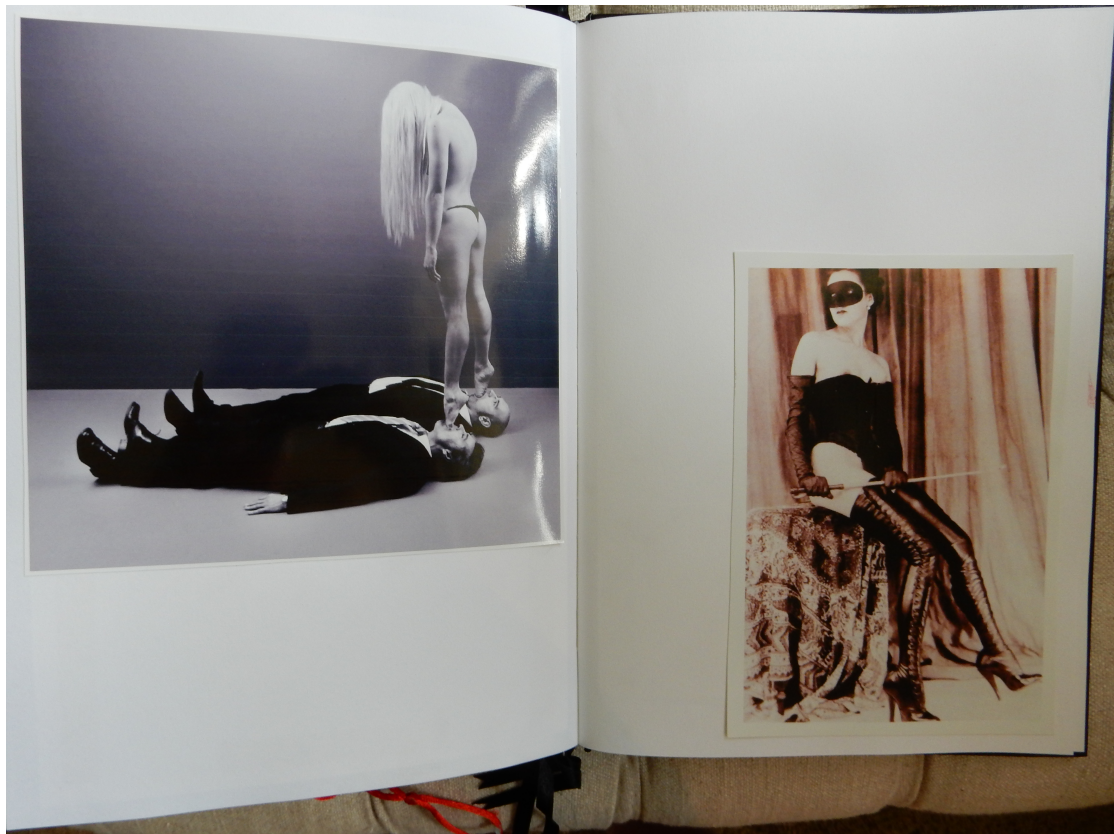


Figure 41: Which gender has the power, that's who I'll be...<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> These images reinforce the notion that gender and power are so often linked. Played out in sexualized performance, dress is used to show control and domination.





Figure 42: It's my way of being free





Figure 43: Gender is so 15 mins of fame!



Figure 44: I am happy like this, no really...



Figure 45: Flowers, lace and frocks...<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Vivienne Westwood, a designer who commercialised punk, now often challenges gender norms with clothing. Here, make-up, flowers and lace, and other typically feminine details combine to challenge traditional messages of femininity.

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